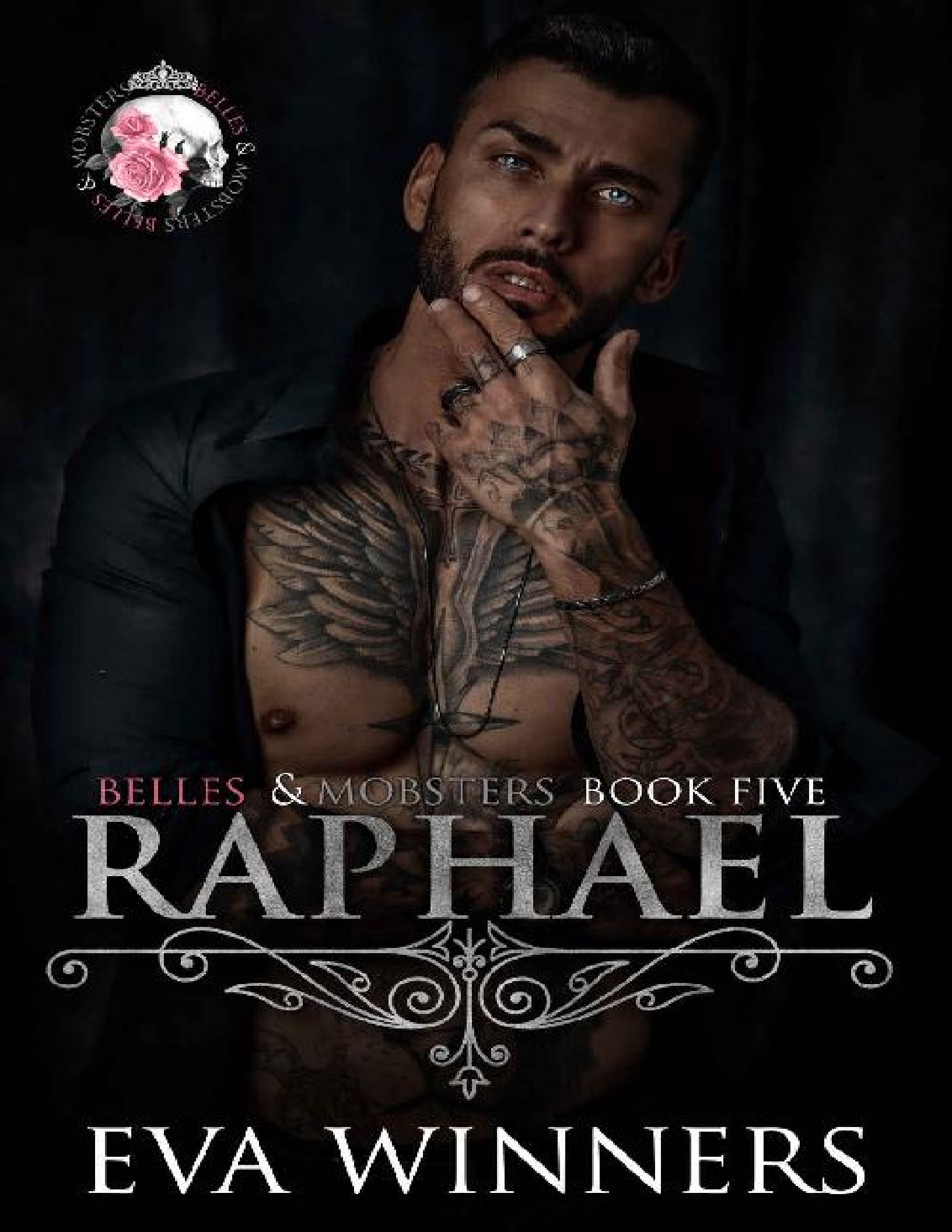
BELLES & MOBSTERS BOOK FIVE
RAPHAEL
EVA WINNERS

RAPHAEL

Belles & Mobsters Series Collection

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EVA WINNERS

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To my family, friends and my readers.

Thank you!

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WARNING

This Ebook contains disturbing scenes and adult language and may be considered offensive to some readers. This e-book is intended for adults ONLY. Please store your files wisely, where they cannot be accessed by under-aged readers.

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BELLES & MOBSTERS SERIES COLLECTION

Each book in Belles & Mobster series can be read as a standalone.

If you'd like a preview to the Belles and Mobsters Book Six make sure to keep reading and check out the prologue to Sasha.

Enjoy!

EVA WINNERS

- EVERLASTING ROMANCE FOR EVERY CENTURY -

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Cover Image Designer: Eve Graphic Design LLC

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PROLOGUE

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Raphael

My driver opened the door and I stepped out of the car. The moment my feet hit the pavement, I inhaled the humid Washington, D.C. air as I walked towards the D.C. Circuit Court of Appeals on Madison Place.

Climbing up the stairs, I entered the large brick building through security and spotted her right away.

Sailor McHale.

I'd been trailing her for the past two weeks. The moment Alexei gave me the tip on Anya and Sailor McHale.

She was already there, putting her phone into the bin. I put mine in the bin behind hers. I wasn't exactly a small man and usually women always glanced my way. Yet, this one never bothered to look in my direction. Either she was completely unaware of me or she just had a habit of keeping her head down and staying out of sight.

"Miss McHale," the guard greeted her.

"Mr. Roberts, how nice to see you." Her lips curved into a smile, reserved but still a pleasant one. "Has your wife had the baby yet?"

"Any day now," he chuckled.

Tilting her head in goodbye, she grabbed her phone and continued on. She was in this building often. More than at home. Sailor McHale was the lead reporter on the whole clusterfuck with the Tijuana Cartel who happened to be

rivals to my own. The idiots had been trying to expand their territory and poach D.C. and Maryland.

Nico Morrelli put a stop to that shit right away. Though he didn’t expect help from the most unlikely petite woman with long, blonde hair.

Turns out, Miss McHale had been following a high ranking member of the Tijuana Cartel and witnessed the killings and women trafficking in the Port of Washington. It was her evidence that put Santiago Tijuana, the fucking asshole, and others behind bars. It was only a matter of time before the members of the Tijuana Cartel made deals with the feds, ratting out their top boss. This woman became the prosecutor's main witness, and it was clear she wasn’t happy about it.

But that was the second reason I was here. There had been whispers that the cartel would be making a move to get rid of Miss McHale - no witness, no case. It was one of the oldest known facts in the world. I knew it would only be a matter of time before they made a move to eliminate her, but I couldn't allow that to happen.

Police and agents guarded her apartment building, her son’s school, and her place of work. Then there were the undercover agents that were always tailing her.

Much to my dismay.

It made it harder to bump into her. To talk to her.

I couldn’t repeat the mistake that I’d made with Bella. No assumptions this time around. There was too much at stake. Although, I did have men watching her too. Discreetly. If her son was indeed my half-brother, I’d be responsible for them.

I grabbed my own phone and left some space before I followed. She sauntered across the large lobby. One of the agents muttered something to her and her head whipped his way. Whatever he told her, it seemed to visibly agitate her and her step faltered.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” she hissed quietly.

I acted like all my attention was on the phone, while I eavesdropped.

“No, he was bailed out.”

“You fucking fools,” she mumbled. “What happened to no bail?”

They lowered their voices further, but I couldn’t risk getting closer and being caught. Not that hearing them mattered. I already knew what the conversation was about. Like the rest of us in the underworld, the Tijuanas had powerful people in their pocket. It wouldn't have taken much to slip money to the right people and get the judgment of 'no bail' changed to 'released on own recognizance'. The only surprising thing about all of it was that it took them as long as it did. So maybe they didn't have as many powerful people to grease the wheel for them in D.C. as I thought. Or maybe they had just as many working different angles.

“Just give me a minute,” she muttered, clearly still agitated. The two agents walked away from her but kept their eyes on her.

I started walking down the large, long hallway toward the courtroom where the hearing was designated to take place.

Just as I was passing her, she swayed and I swiftly caught her elbow. An abundance of smooth, long, silky blonde hair the color of freshly fallen snow, brushed over my sleeve.

“Fucking heels,” she muttered, gripping my sleeve.

Her soft body leaned into mine and the attraction was instant. Just like all those years ago. At least on my part. It took me all of two seconds to notice the generous curve of her breasts. Porcelain skin. Smooth cheekbones. Pink lips calling to me. And a sexy, determined look on her face.

Yes, she was beautiful. A blind man could see it. But it wasn’t about that. It was about the way her body fit against mine. A dusting of freckles on her face that I wanted to

devour. The sweet primrose scent. Everything about her pulled at a string that I considered dead.

“Not a fan of heels?” I asked.

“Fuck no.”

I chuckled softly. I never expected a member of the McHale family to have such a foul mouth. Sailor McHale came from one of the oldest families in the States, with a long history of being prominent in American politics.

Straightening up, she glanced my way and our eyes met. Her blue eyes slammed into me, and for a moment, I drowned in them. They reminded me of the waters along the shores of Miami… a beautiful, clear blue along the edges that became darker the closer it drew to the pupil.

She was breathtaking.

Though I didn’t think Miss McHale felt the same attraction because her eyes widened in horror. It reminded me of the terror on her face when I caught one of my men touching her. Needless to say, he no longer walked this Earth.

She quickly schooled her expression.

“Thank you,” she murmured, glancing away from me.

“Is everything alright, Miss McHale?” If these damn agents took this long to get here, they were incompetent. She could have been dead already.

“Yes,” she answered before I even acknowledged the two incompetent morons.

Sailor took a step away from me, and to my surprise, she went back in the opposite direction. Towards the exit of the building. I watched as she hurried down the hallway, and I took a step to follow her when a massive explosion ripped through the building. Glass shattered everywhere and debris flew through the air. I watched as Sailor fell onto her knees. I had just enough time to run to her and cover her body with mine before another explosion rocked the building.

This attack was because of this woman. Because of what she had seen. I needed to get her the fuck out of here. Out of this city.

Her and my little brother.

“What’s happening?” she yelled above the sirens and alarms blaring through the courthouse, the fear clear in her voice. Her body tried to move beneath me, as she pushed away chunks of debris. "I have to get to my son." Fear taking a back seat to the urgency now in her voice.

"I can protect you and Gabriel," I gritted out, trying to keep her safe beneath me. I wasn't sure what to expect... another explosion, a round of gunfire, all fucking hell to break loose. Whatever was coming, I didn't want her harmed... I needed to protect her.

Transferring my weight to one side, I reached in my pocket and yanked free my cell phone. It was time to move.

The Tijuana Cartel had come for them.

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Chapter One

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RAPHAEL

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Eight Years Ago

The dance floor was crowded while gamblers swarmed the upper floors, ready to lose their money. It was the opening night of my newest club.

La Reina.

And so far, it had superseded openings of any of my other clubs, tenfold. Unfortunately, my day was ruined by the *pinche cabrón* facing me. My piece of shit casino manager who thought it was a good idea to steal a shipment from me.

Never steal from any Santos.

The entire state of Florida knew better. Our reputation spoke volumes. My own reputation spoke for me. The Florida underground bowed to me. I owned all the cocaine distribution and over ninety percent of the casinos. *Gambling.* The only business I would never touch was human trafficking. Unlike my old man.

“Diablo…” He swallowed hard, his Adam’s apple bobbing in his throat. “It was a mistake.”

Fucking idiot. There was a reason everyone called me Diablo.

“Damn straight,” I told him calmly. “And I don’t give second chances. Fool me once and all that.”

A bead of sweat rolled down his forehead. Pedro Morreno. He used to be dependable. Now he walked

around with white powder on his nose.

“I’ll never do it again,” he pleaded.

“Right again,” I offered calmly. “Because you won’t have a chance to fuck me over anymore.”

He knew the rules. He knew my reputation. He stuck his hand in my pocket and helped himself to my money. If he had come to me and asked for a loan, that would have been one thing. But stealing from me would never be tolerated.

“Please, Señor Santos,” he pleaded, his knees bouncing frantically. “I’ll pay it all back.”

I hated being called Señor Santos. That was my father.

I pulled out my gun, screwed down the silencer, and shot him.

It was the only mercy he’d get.

“Clean up this mess,” I ordered my men and left the enclosed space.

Fuck, nothing ruined your mood faster than this kind of shit.

Pulling out my phone, I made my way upstairs to my office. It was then that I heard a throaty laugh. It had my head turning in its direction and my steps faltered. The first thing I spotted was the long, silvery blonde hair that glowed under the lights of the dance floor. It reflected the changing colors of the lights - red, blue, green, orange.

Jesus, that hair color! Even from here I could see it was the most unusual color. Like a freshly fallen snow, but with the hint of warmth to it. It made me want to wrap my hands around those long silky strands and see if they were as soft as they looked.

I’d stake my life that they were.

And her body… fucking centerfold-worthy. And the girl knew it. She wore a black corset with a long colorful dress. Blue with large pink flowers. Something I’d seen women wear in Colombia - loud, colorful, and different.

And that hair! Madre de Dios. I could wrap it around my fist. Twice. I didn’t particularly care for blondes, but her

hair was unlike any I had ever seen. So light, it almost appeared silver. Like some fairy. She only needed the damn wings and you'd think she'd fly through the air of my new club.

Another laugh rang through. There was no way of missing the girl. And yes, she had to be a young girl, maybe eighteen.

I'd watched her smile at her friends, oblivious that all the male attention was on her. Well, her and her friends, but fuck, she was breathtaking.

She wasn't alone, giggling with two other girlfriends. The three of them hung out around the bar, peeking at the dance floor that was slowly getting crowded. It was only seven at night so too early for the full blown nightclub atmosphere.

"Oh, come on," she exclaimed. "It's our first time away from home. No parents. No brothers. We're here to paaaarty."

My lips curved up into a smile. It has been a while since I'd heard such enthusiasm.

The three of them hustled toward the center of the dance floor together, everyone parting for them and ogling them with hunger in their eyes.

Not that I could blame them. All three were gorgeous. But it was something about the blonde one that had me captivated. I couldn't tear my eyes away from her face. She was young, and I'd bet she wasn't old enough to be in my club. It was twenty-one and older. There was no way she was twenty-one. She barely looked eighteen.

Her friend whispered something in her ear. Whatever she said to her had the silvery blonde throwing her head back and laughing. I had never heard a melodious laugh like hers. The kind that made you want to bask in its happiness.

I just wished I could see her eyes. Were they glittering like diamonds, reflecting her happiness?

I walked closer, taking in every inch of her curved body that accentuated her perfect ass. She swayed her hips to the rhythm, rotating and twisting, and men surrounded her.

One of the girls pointed back to the bar, and the two of them nodded their heads, while the silvery blonde just shook hers. The two scurried through the crowd, leaving their friend dancing alone.

Getting nearer with each step, I stopped right behind her. She must have sensed me because she glanced over her slim, tan shoulder. As her eyes lifted, ever so slowly, I felt her gaze like a touch. It made no fucking sense.

Then our gazes connected. Her eyes were electrifying. *Blue.* Beautiful.

But there were no traces of the carefree happiness in her ocean blue depths. There were secrets in those eyes. Pain. Sorrow. And then a smile that masked it all.

What did I have to base this on? Absolutely nothing.

“Care to dance?” I asked her.

Up close, she seemed even younger than I originally thought. Even more stunning. One day, she’d be a gorgeous woman that would steal men’s attention with just a smile. In our world, that was dangerous.

She blinked, turned around as if she thought I was talking to someone else. There wasn’t another woman around so she returned her attention back to me.

“With me?” Holy fuck, her voice was soft. And young. Way too young.

“I don’t see another woman next to you,” I retorted dryly. I should get the bouncers to escort her out. Yet, here I was putting my hand on her hip and turning her to face me. Something about the innocence in her eyes tugged at me.

She rolled her eyes. “Well, you’re kind of old to be dancing with me,” she remarked but her arms came around my neck. “Like way old.” Sassy girl.

My eyes roamed down her body over the corset that accentuated her breasts. An unfamiliar feeling of possessiveness hit me.

“Well, this is a twenty-one and older club,” I said dryly.

Red stains marred her cheeks. An admittance to her underage. “I am twenty-one.”

The girl wasn’t a very good liar either.

“Yeah, so am I.”

The same laugh that grabbed my attention earlier rang from her lips, and I watched her, mesmerized. Her face lit up and the sound seeped into my lungs.

Her blue eyes met mine, shimmering like stars.

“Okay then, we’re both twenty-one,” she stated, her full lips smiling mischievously.

We started to move to the music, her eyes cautiously studying me. I wondered if she recognized me as one of the Santos brothers or if she was merely curious.

“So where are you from?” I asked.

“From the U.S.”

A little smarty pants, I see. “Any specific part?”

“East Coast,” she answered vaguely. “You?”

Okay, so it turned out she didn’t recognize me. In a way, I was relieved.

“Born in Colombia, but lived here for as long as I can remember,” I told her.

“Ahhh.” Her eyes lit up curiously. “Ever go back to Colombia?”

A sardonic breath left me. It was where most of my drug distributions came from. “Frequently.”

“Is it nice?” she asked, almost holding her breath. Like a bird that had been caged for far too long. “Caño Cristales are on my bucket list. So are The Rosario Islands.”

I cocked my eyebrow. “That’s an unusual bucket list.”

She chuckled. “Do you have a bucket list?”

Her voice was so soft I had to bend my head lower to catch it.

“Yeah.” It boiled down to staying alive. “I like your bucket list better.”

She tilted her head, studying me. There was something broken underneath all that innocence. I’d recognize it anywhere. I’d seen it in my mother. I’d seen it in the women my father and brother would break in.

Yet, it didn’t fit the type of woman that she was. Wealth. Privilege.

The air about her spoke of a sophisticated upbringing. The way she spoke was evidence of an excellent education. And the way she carried herself was a clear indication of a pampered life.

“So of all the places in the world, what makes you curious about Colombia?”

She glanced around, as if she was looking for someone, then leaned forward.

“My parents hate Hispanics,” she whispered. “And dogs,” she added. “It makes me want to visit every country in South America and send them a postcard. With a cute guy in it. And adopt every dog. Except they’d probably kill them.”

She was the oddest girl I had ever danced with.

And the most beautiful.

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Chapter Two

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SAILOR

The song was over too quickly.

I should return to my girlfriends and Anya. But it felt so good to be dancing with a handsome stranger for a bit. It was a risk to stay around him, considering I was under twenty-one and he knew it. If he realized I was just a few weeks shy of eighteen, he'd probably be even more freaked out.

"Thank you for the dance," I told him with a smile.

He was unlike any other man I had ever seen. The moment our eyes met, my breath caught in my lungs. He was *sinfully* beautiful. Taller than any other man around here. Tousled dark hair, a devilishly handsome body in an expensive black suit. His skin was a rich golden tone that added to his mysterious charisma. But it was his eyes that captured me.

Blue. Magnetic.

Against his golden skin, they appeared even lighter.

"Running away, Reina." The way he said it sent vibrations through my veins and made me want to faint. Like in one of those stupid, romantic movies.

"If I run, will you chase?" The words were out of my mouth. Reckless. Daring.

It wasn't me. But I wanted it to be me.

His sensual lips tipped up. “Do you want me to?”

Yes. No. Maybe.

I wanted a prince. A savior.

“Only if you save me,” I breathed.

We still moved together on the dance floor, oblivious to the tempo of the song playing. It sounded like “Die For Me” by Post Malone and Halsey.

God, I kind of wanted a man like that to save me. My sister. To take us away.

I wanted to be a strong, independent woman. Save Anya and myself. Never depend on a man for anything. If Father didn’t care about hurting his own children, neither would other men. Our father made us into his victims. Anya suffered a lot more; she always protected me.

His body was all muscle underneath his suit, and it was only then that I spotted it. A splatter of red.

Blood.

There was blood on top of his hand. His cracked knuckles and hands had ink marking them. The letters on his hand read ***Diablo***.

My steps halted. My heart froze. And my eyes widened.

“What is it, Reina?” His voice was deep, his eyes sharp on me. “Who do you need saving from?”

The prince was the devil.

I needed to get out of here, and I needed to do it fast.

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Chapter Three

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RAPHAEL

I watched her walk away from me, taking something with her that I couldn't quite pinpoint.

Three heartbeats passed and I went after her.

She strode towards the bathrooms. I powered through the dark hallway when a wounded sound stopped me.

"Get the hell off me!" The voice belonged to my reina. To the girl with the silver blonde hair.

It was then that I saw one of my bouncers, his filthy hands gripping her beautiful hair and her body pinned against the wall. His crotch was grinding against her and his hand was skimming up her leg.

"I'll fuck both of your holes, fancy bitch," he leered.

A red haze marred my vision, and fury burned in my throat and my chest.

"Get your fucking hands off her," I roared, my gun already in my hand with a *click* to the gun's safety.

Instantly, his hands jerked off her body like he got burned.

The look in her eyes tore at my fucking heart.

Terror. Vulnerability. Ghosts.

And it was *that* which sent me over the edge.

My hand wrapped around the fucker's throat and I squeezed. Hard.

I turned my eyes to her. The girl that should be all smiles and safe in my club.

“Did he-” Fuck, I couldn’t say the word. It couldn’t have happened that fast. Right? “What did he do?”

When she didn’t answer, I reined in my rage. I was scaring her. Still gripping the throat of my bouncer, I let out a calming breath.

“Are you okay, Reina?”

She swallowed. “He didn’t rape me,” she whispered. “You came and-”

We were getting an audience now. Diego, my right hand man, showed up and I signaled him over.

“Boss.”

The girl's wide eyes were still on me. She didn’t look at the man I was squeezing the living daylights out of. Literally. Her eyes were locked on me, as if she needed to absorb my strength.

“Walk this lady back to her friends,” I ordered. “Safely. Anyone who touches them will answer directly to me. Then come back so we can take care of this cabrón.”

Her lower lip quivered. Fuck, I had just met the girl and seeing her upset didn’t sit well with me. *She doesn’t belong in my world.* The thought pierced through my chest in the most unexpected way. Why? I had no fucking idea. Or maybe I did have an idea.

I wanted her. For some reason, I wanted this girl - to protect her from all the evil in the world. Except, if I dragged her into my world, she’d be exposed to it all.

Diego walked up to her. “Let’s go, princess,” he urged, but he didn’t touch her.

Her chest rose and she took a deep breath then exhaled. “Thank you.”

A soft whisper and she was gone.

The moment she was gone, I bared my teeth into a feral grin. With my free hand, I grabbed his arm and twisted him around, then slapped my hand over his mouth.

Before anyone could see, I stabbed my knife into his back, careful to miss his liver. I definitely didn't want to end him too quickly by hitting his vital organs. Twirling my knife, I shoved it even deeper and every so often scraped against his ribs.

He screamed like a pig, grunting beneath my hand. Then with a sharp punch to the back of his head, I knocked him unconscious. His body slumped over, and it took everything in me not to fucking kick him in the goddamn balls.

For trying to rape a girl. In my club.

Caine and Diego showed up at that very moment. Diego started to bark the orders to the other bouncers while Caine used his body to block the view of the miserable fucker in front of me.

Once the area was clear, we dragged him down the dark corridor to one of the torture rooms I had set up in the basement. Every single one of my establishments had this room.

Wonderful, right back to the basement, I grumbled dryly.

A trail of blood spilled behind us as we hauled the body down the hallway. Every single one of my bouncers was built, and at this very moment, I fucking regretted it. He was heavy as fuck, even with his weight distributed between me and Caine.

Once in the basement, I swept my palm over the scanner of our security system and opened the steel, soundproof door. I spent hundreds of thousands of dollars transforming the basement of every building I owned into an impenetrable fortress.

First floor and above were designed in state-of-the-art luxury and security, but the security above didn't compare to what we had down here. Nothing could get through this basement door.

The soundproof walls would hide the sound of a detonated bomb. The basement was where I handled all of my business - human traffickers, pedophiles, murders, and potential rapists. Anyone that dared to double-cross me.

If only I could drag my father here and get rid of him too.

Caine and I shoved the body of the fucker onto the stainless steel table and started chaining him up. Yeah, it was the opening night, and yes, we'd use the torture room plenty of times over the last few weeks.

The body on the table jerked and the discussion was put on pause.

"I didn't know she was yours." Ah, the sleeping fucker woke up. "Come on, I didn't know. There are plenty of other pussies for me to hit."

My molars ground together. "Not in my club, coño," I gritted.

This pendejo would get an extra slow death. The slowest fucking death to ever happen since God created this Earth.

"Why don't you be a good little bitch, and shut the fuck up."

He opened his mouth and Spanish words spilled from his lips. "Me cago en tu madre." *I shit on your mother*.

Oh this fucker would get a double whammy. "Oh you fucked up," Caine grinned. "This torture session will be so much fun, *pendejo*."

I punched him in the nose, relishing in the crunch of cartilage beneath my fist. At least I'd get relief this way tonight. Blood squirted from his broken nose and trickled down his ugly-ass face. He started jerking against the chains, like a worm on a hook.

"Let's play, shall we?"

The panicked look on his face was priceless. He finally came to realize the truth. He wouldn't survive this. Terror filled his expression.

“Please, please,” he panted, his eyes filling with tears. He didn’t fucking care when his victim was terrified. And he thought I’d give him mercy. Not in a million fucking years.

So I punched him again. Just for the principle of it. He gurgled on his blood and attempted to spit it out, his tooth coming out too. The fucker was a lousy spitter.

His nose had started swelling and his eyes were bruised. Grabbing a tool off the table, I leaned over him, letting him see the tool I was about to use on him.

A screwdriver.

His eyes widened, his eyeballs ready to pop out.

I smiled cruelly, relishing the fear in his eyes.

“I hear you like to beat your girls,” Caine spat disgustedly. “Force yourself on them. Like you tried on Diablo’s girl.”

His head shook back and forth wildly. Fucking liar. He was caught with his hands on her, groping her. Just thinking about it made me see red.

Without delay, I shoved the screwdriver into his abdomen and his screams filled the room as his face turned blood red.

“Diablo, I’m sorry,” he bellowed like a fucking bitch, a vein pulsing in his forehead. “I didn’t know she was yours. I’m sorry.”

In response, I slowly pulled the screwdriver out of his abdomen so he could feel every single thing. He started coughing, blood trickling down the side of his mouth. He was a fucking mess.

Then I stabbed the screwdriver straight into his abdomen again.

“This is for every woman you ever hurt,” I hissed in a low tone. “And especially for the one you touched upstairs. Because she is *la reina* and you are fucking dirt under her feet.”

Much to my dismay. The fucker only lasted ten minutes.

Goddamn coward.

I'd committed plenty of cold-blooded murders. And I'd done it for various reasons. For raping a child, killing an innocent, or destroying the life of an innocent.

But I'd never killed someone out of jealousy.

Yes, my fucking bouncer scared my reina, but I'd be a fucking liar if I didn't admit to myself that it gnawed at me that he touched her. He fucking touched her. Marred her snow white skin with his filthy fingers.

It took all of my control not to go after her and drag the beautiful, young woman home with me.

It was my fault. I knew giving this fucker a chance was a bad fucking move. It was the last time I'd ever let my father convince me of anything. This guy was a fucking psychopath. A real one. He liked to fuck rough and beat even rougher.

The anger simmered, making my blood run a few degrees hotter. The guy deserved to die.

Once I cleaned up, I headed upstairs to my office. As I neared my office, I could hear soft whimpers. It should have been my clue, but I was so fucking pissed off that it didn't register in my brain. Instead, I cracked my neck to release some of the tension and as I neared my office.

I entered it to find my father's hand around a young woman's neck, hissing something under his breath.

"Jesus fucking Christ." I wasn't in the mood for this today. Did all fucking predators decide to show up on the opening night of my new club? I strode towards the two of them. "Let go of her," I hissed.

I wasn't above killing another man today.

Father or not.

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Chapter Four

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SAILOR

One moment.

Just one moment of unawareness and the guy snatched me, shoving me against the wall. My hands shook, adrenaline and fear still thick in my veins. I took deep breaths in and then exhaled, repeatedly.

Stupid. I was so goddamn stupid. How many times had Anya told me to always be alert? Never to lower my guard when in public. Or even at home. Not unless we were alone.

Another deep inhale. *Exhale.*

By the time I joined my girlfriends at the bar with the man trailing behind me, my pulse was somewhat steady. Although with every step closer to them, I worried whether I had gotten us in trouble.

I took a moment to scan the area. Sleek, black velvet booths surrounded the space and black crystal chandeliers hung from above.

The girls were standing in front of the bartender sipping on drinks like we had done this a million times. We hadn't. It was our first time in a club. Not our first time drinking. We drank plenty during this break. Our first time away from home. Alone.

I glanced behind me, almost expecting to see the stranger again. He wasn't there. He was extremely handsome. Dangerously so. It'd be impossible to forget his face. Mesmerizing eyes. Jet-black hair. He had the perfect five o'clock shadow, and his cheekbones were so sharp that when my fingers wrapped around his nape, I couldn't resist brushing them over the soft hair at the nape of his neck.

Except he was the devil. The tattoo on his hand couldn't have been clearer. *Diablo*. And he saved me. He swept in and saved me.

But now, I had to explain to my friends that we had to get out of here. My eyes roamed over them and just as quickly as *Diablo* entered my mind, he also left when I noticed Anya was missing.

"Where is Anya?" I questioned, alarmed. As if she anticipated my return, my older sister sauntered toward us, and I rushed to her. "Where were you?"

The smile I had come to know, the one that hid everything - her pain, secrets, and ghosts - played around her lips. I hated it. I wished we'd just pack it up and leave everything behind. Mom, Dad, their fucked up world, everyone.

Well, not Aurora and Willow. I'd miss them terribly. But for my sister, I'd do it. I'd do anything for Anya. My sister had been protecting me for too long.

Years of hiding the family secrets. Lies had become too natural. I wasn't sure who we were anymore. Carefree hadn't been in our vocabulary since I was five. The black cloud had been following me ever since knowing that something was wrong. I just didn't know what it was until I was old enough to understand.

"I got invited to a party," Anya announced.

My brows scrunched. "In a bathroom?"

The look she gave me was void of all emotion. The one that happened after she'd been hurt. After Father hurt her.

But he wasn’t here. *Right?* My eyes roamed the crowded room. Not a single familiar face in sight.

“It’s an important party,” she remarked in a monotone voice. I hated it when she was like that. Broken. Hurt. Shattered.

“Does it have a pool?” Aurora questioned her.

Anya just shrugged.

“Every house has a pool in this area,” Willow reasoned. “We could go skinny dipping.”

The music blasted through the space, drowning out some of my thoughts. But not my worry. My sixth sense warned me that something wasn’t right. Except, the main reason for all our troubles was miles away.

“Where is the party?” Willow asked curiously.

“Two blocks away,” Anya explained.

“Let’s do it,” Willow exclaimed, jumping up and down. “This place is boring anyhow.”

I glanced around again. I wanted to thank the stranger for saving me. I wanted to make sure he was alright.

“I’m game,” Aurora chimed in.

Come to find out, the devil had many faces.

When we arrived at an old colonial home, it was clear there was no party. Alarms sounded in my head.

“I don’t know–” I started but was immediately interrupted.

“We’re going in,” Anya cut me off, that stubborn look on her face. She raised her hand and banged on the grand entrance gate. “Hello,” she yelled. “We have an invitation.”

Willow peeked through marble columns that surrounded the house.

“It has a pool,” she exclaimed victoriously.

“We don’t have bathing suits,” I protested weakly.

Both Aurora and Willow started stripping. “We’ll use our undergarments as bathing suits,” Aurora reasoned.

We’d been doing stupid things lately. Reckless things. It was fun, but in the back of my mind, I kept worrying about the consequences.

“We should really go back to the hotel,” I told them all. “All of us, Anya.”

The three of them didn’t pay me any attention as they discarded their clothes and climbed the stone fence.

“Bad idea,” I muttered, my eyes darting around us, then with a heavy sigh, I followed them. They were tipsier than I was so they’d need someone to look after them.

I kept my clothes on, but my long dress made it hard to climb. Scrunching up the dress, I lifted it around my waist then swung my leg over the fence, shortly followed by my other. By the time I was on the inside, Willow and Aurora were skinny dipping.

Anya stood at the edge of the pool. I crossed the lawn in quick steps and came to a stop next to my sister.

“This is a bad idea,” I murmured softly.

“It’s an invitation.”

“Then why did we climb over the fence?” She lifted her shoulder, refusing to meet my eyes. “Anya, please talk to me,” I whispered.

Something was wrong. I could see it on her face. I could feel it in her every breath.

“Everything is great.” That dead voice I hated so much. “It’s a pretty home, huh?”

Glancing up at the manor, I had to agree. But we’ve seen plenty of other mansions like this. This place reminded me of a South Georgian home. Kind of like a home from the movie *Gone with the Wind*. It had the same kind of romantic grandness about it.

“Sure,” I agreed reluctantly. “Can we go now? You grab Willow and I’ll grab Aurora, then we will go back to the hotel.”

She didn’t answer, her eyes locked on a dark spot in the corner of the yard. I followed her gaze, but I couldn’t see anything there.

“Anya, you’re freaking me out,” I rasped. Her dark eyes met mine. There was so much sadness and pain in them that it fucking hurt my soul. “The two of us could run away together. Hide until I’m eighteen. And then Father and Mother have no rights over us.”

A bitter laugh, soft and sad, slipped through her lips. “He’ll always find us, Sail.”

I took her hand into mine and squeezed. “Not if we change our looks. Go to South America or something. We’ll hide. For the rest of our lives if we have to. At least we’ll be safe and happy. Just the two of us.”

Our gazes locked, I saw a glimpse of hope in hers. The same kind I felt in my soul.

She opened her mouth, but then the lights in the yard came on. Men started shouting. Dogs started barking.

The light of hope in her went out. “It’s too late,” she whispered.

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Chapter Five

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SAILOR

I squeezed my eyes shut, hoping it was all a bad dream. Like so many others I had in the past.

But it wasn't.

After the lights came on, guards with guns pointed at us ushered us inside. Anya was separated from us, while we were locked in some makeshift room with bars.

I had never been locked up, but something told me it had a similar set up.

Anya cried out as the old man backhanded her. Willow and Aurora whimpered, tears streaming down their faces. Another slap followed.

"Please," I screamed. "Stop it." I couldn't stay quiet anymore. Someone had to save Anya. It had to be me. There was nobody else.

"Shut up or I'll drag you out of there," the old man threatened. "Two for one. After all, I deserve it after he fucked me over."

I didn't understand his reference. It wasn't until much, much later that I pondered on those words.

I rattled the bars. "Leave her alone, you fucking bastard," I screeched. Cold sweat rolled down my spine, my knuckles turned white as I gripped the bars like Anya's life depended on it.

The fucker locked us up like we were dogs.

“For every fucking word,” he threatened before slapping my sister again, “she’ll pay.”

Anya whimpered, tears staining her face. I instantly stilled, my blood freezing in my veins.

Anya’s lip was split and swollen, blood trickled down her chin. Her one eye was bruised. And my heart fucking hurt unlike ever before. It was like that fucking squeaky bed all over again.

A sob escaped her lips and he growled at her to shut up before he went back to his business. Her whimpers quieted, her gaze emptied, and I swore she died right in front of me. I watched life leave her right there in front of my eyes as he kept thrusting into her.

Bile rose in my throat. I didn’t want to see, yet I couldn’t look away. He was raping her.

Please, please God, I prayed in my mind. *I’ll do anything. Give you anything. Please just end this.*

I tasted vomit on my tongue. It tasted of alcohol, tears, and a cursed fate that would put this on her. Sickness and disgust blasted me. The old man kept thrusting as he held her down in front of him. His legs trapped her while his one hand held her wrists together. He kept going, his grunts filling the air and mixing with all of our whimpers.

Aurora came from behind me and wrapped her arms around me, her head buried in my back.

“Don’t look, Sail,” she whispered. “It will leave a mark. Damage your soul.”

Too late. I was already damaged from the first time she saved me. Hate and rage slithered through my blood, growing until it suffocated me. I hated him. I hated Father. I hated them all.

Anya stopped fighting. He defeated her. He finally broke her, and I was witnessing it all. Her agony was heart-wrenching. My hand trembled and my fingers flexed

imagining a knife in my hand. So I could stab it into this man’s heart. So I could stab my own father.

Another soft whimper slipped when he ordered her to shut up again. He thrust harder, deeper. He kept going, while every fiber of my being wanted to explode.

I wanted to scream. I wanted to rage. I wanted to go ballistic. And I was ready, until Anya’s eyes met mine.

The order was clear in her eyes. Remain invisible.

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Chapter Six

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SAILOR

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Present

"Scream."

I learned to hate that voice. My father's.

"Cry for me, my little whore." The cold, cruel whisper invaded my dream. The familiar man's voice.

A squeaking bed. Fingers curled over the edge of the bed, gripping it hard. Ugly fingers. Wrinkled fingers. One of those fingers held the ring with the McHale family crest.

A scream bubbled in my throat, but Anya said to be quiet.

So I bit into my hand. Hard. I felt the pain while the noises made my stomach churn. I hated that fucking bed. Hot, salty tears dripped down my chin.

"Scream, damn it."

The words bellowed through the blackness that threatened to swallow me whole.

I woke up with a start, the sheets stuck to my sweaty skin and my breathing labored. The nightlight threw shadows over the walls, as dark and menacing as the ghosts that threatened my dreams. Yet, I couldn't handle sleeping in the dark.

I feared it. I was terrified of it.

It was the reason I often found myself in Anya's room. I feared the dark. She was used to it. Preferred it even. I always cried, she barely ever did. I only found sleep when I

could hear her breathing. When we were both together, in the same room.

Because I was scared of the monster that lurked in the dark. The one that hurt Anya.

With a tremor in my fingers, I shoved a sweat-damp lock of hair out of my face. The tremor that started in my fingers spread beneath my skin, buzzing stronger than ever before.

Maybe I sensed that a storm was coming. It had been brewing ever since Aurora told me about running into Raphael Santos. Or maybe it had started with my investigation into the Tijuana Cartel and the women they trafficked to the Port of Washington.

Either way, I knew the impending research and investigation into the Tijuana Cartel and their human trafficking would bring trouble to my door. And I still did it.

For Anya. For any woman that found herself a victim of the cruel men like my father and Lombardo Santos. The old man I believed to be Gabriel's father.

Believed was the key word here.

God, I didn't know which was worse. Gabriel being my father's son or Lombardo Santos' son. Aurora ran into Raphael Santos in New Orleans. She said Gabriel looked just like him, and I didn't object. Frankly, it felt like a relief - except that if the Santos family knew about Gabriel, I feared what they'd do.

The old man was dead, but the son that took over wasn't. All my research showed that Raphael Santos didn't handle business like his father. Yes, he was a criminal, but he seemed to stick to some kind of code.

At least it appeared that way. I just wished I'd been able to locate a single picture of him. There was nothing on the web. The man moved like a ghost in the dark.

Or maybe like the devil, I snickered to myself.

Diablo.

An awareness tickled in the back of my mind at that word. A distant memory. But before I could hone in on it, it

dissipated.

I shook my head. No need to stress over non-existent crap. I'd worry about the Santos family and Gabriel's paternity if it ever came to that. But there was one thing I knew for certain. I wouldn't air our dirty laundry.

Nobody knew about Father's abuse. *Nobody.* And I'd keep it that way so when Gabriel learned about his birth mother, there was nothing tainting her memory.

So as fucked up as it was, after what we had witnessed in Miami that night eight years ago and the timing of Anya's pregnancy, I had never disputed the fact that Anya's baby was indeed the result of that horrid night. The truth was that Anya didn't know. She confessed right before she went into labor that Father continued raping her long after she led me to believe he'd stopped.

My fingernails dug into the palms of my hands and I welcomed the pain. It was nothing compared to what my sister endured.

"Don't think about that," I rasped in the dark of the night, my voice shaky. Gabriel was my son. Nobody else's, just mine. He was innocent in all of this, and I'd kill before I let anyone destroy his innocence.

Catching my breath, I attempted to ease my wild heartbeats as I stared at the ceiling of my bedroom. I hated dreams. I hated secrets. Most of all, I hated nightmares. They always came. My best friends, Aurora and Willow, thought it was brought on by that night on our spring break in Miami.

It wasn't.

My nightmares started a long time ago. Before I ever met my best friends. Before I even learned to write.

Father's emotional and mental abuse was bad. He taunted. Purposely scared us. I was spared his disgusting physical abuse. My sister wasn't. He called her 'his little whore' and Mother let him. He slapped her and kicked her. Mother let him. When he was particularly agitated or mad,

he’d kick me too. But never as bad as Anya. He hated her the most; so I loved her even more.

Because she needed me the most.

I hadn’t seen my parents since Gabriel, my son, was born. Truthfully, he was my nephew, my sister’s son. With her death, I took him as mine and the promise I made to my sister would be kept at all costs.

Gabriel was mine. My son. My family. My everything. And I’d protect him with my life.

My blood ran cold each time I thought about it. Anya’s pain. Her shame. Her fear that ultimately died with her last breath. Her life was a nightmare. But she finally found her peace. The one I couldn’t give her.

The secret squeezed my throat, threatening to suffocate me. Nobody knew. Fucking nobody, and somehow after all these years, the secret became larger than life. Until I had no way of digging myself out of this dark hole.

Shame and disgust filled me. It was a sinkhole I didn’t know how to get out of. I swallowed the big lump in my throat. I hated thinking or dreaming about it. It felt like reliving it over and over again. Like haunting ghosts that refused to be laid to rest.

I had to see my son, to assure myself he was safe. Gabriel slept in the room next to mine, so I got out of bed and kept my steps silent as I headed for his room. My feet padded against the hardwood, the cool of the floor soothing.

I didn’t worry about running into anyone. Aurora was still not back, closing out her case in New Orleans. She’d solved it, but she still struggled with the outcome of her revelations. Her brothers would ensure she came out on top. Willow worked on a new production in California, leaving Gabriel and me alone in the Ashford penthouse that we’d lived in since he was born.

I opened the door and snuck into the dark bedroom, careful not to step on the toys. Unlike me, Gabriel wasn’t

scared to sleep in the dark. My hand shook like a leaf as I pushed my son’s dark curls out of his face and tears stung my eyes.

God, it was bad when you hoped that he was actually the old Santos’ son rather than your father’s. I still remembered how Lombardo Santos looked and I’d say Gabriel resembled him more than my father, so maybe there was hope. I let out a heavy high.

Why didn’t I say something? I thought it had all stopped, but I was so fucking wrong. It was wishful thinking. Anya had kept hiding the ugliness behind her carefree smiles and reckless decisions. It was all there, plain as day, and I fucking missed it.

Still guilt clawed its way into my soul and refused to let go.

I failed Anya; I refused to fail Gabriel too.

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Chapter Seven

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RAPHAEL

My phone beeped.

A message from Alexei. I rarely spoke to him and now twice in the same day we exchanged messages. Earlier today, he asked for help locating a guy, Igor, who dared fuck with him and his FBI agent. Coincidently, the fucker had an estate in Florida and I was happy to help.

I wondered if he maybe needed help with clean-up because I had no doubt that Alexei killed the man. Probably sliced him to pieces while he was still alive so he'd hear his screams. There was something unhinged about Alexei; although I trusted the man with my life. He was the type to never break his word, regardless of the fact that we shared a non-blood related connection through Isabella Nikolaev, our mutual half-sister. The two of them shared a mother while the two of us shared a father.

I slid the message open and the words staring back at me sent a wave of shock through me.

Look into Anya and Sailor McHale. One of them had a son. He's your half-brother.

The message was cryptic. Too cryptic for my liking.

I typed back. ***What do you mean 'one of them'?***

And seriously, another half-sibling? What. The. Fuck!

Bubbles appeared instantly. ***He hurt Anya. Birth certificate shows Sailor McHale as the mother.***

Fucking clear as mud. I expected nothing less from the man who barely spoke.

Glancing at the clock, I noted the time. It was almost ten at night. The incoming breeze through the open balcony door caught the white muslin drapes, opening the view to the open ocean. I sat at my desk in my bedroom, enjoying the view.

I loved this island. I bought it before my older brother was killed, before I took over the Santos Cartel. Only the closest ones to me knew about the location. There were plenty of men who wanted me dead before I took over our family business. There were even more since. Both my father and my brother were really good at making enemies.

Even after I took over the Santos empire, I kept the cartel's business and men separate from my own men. I ran the cartel business out of Miami. Everything else from here.

I rang my right hand man, Caine.

"Don't you sleep, Santos," he grumbled.

"Unlike you, I don't share children's bedtime habits."

"Fuck you, asshole."

I chuckled. "You first."

"Okay, what do you want?"

"I need you to dig up information on Anya and Sailor McHale."

"Who?" I could hear the surprise in his voice.

"The McHale family is very old and prominent in politics. They are as established as the Kennedys and rumored to eventually tie their power through a marriage alliance. You must have heard of them."

"And why the fuck do I care?" Yeah, I wouldn't have cared either if I hadn't received information from Alexei. "I hate goddamn politics."

I wasn’t much of a fan either, but at a young age, I had learned that connections were important. So I’ve learned early on to know everything about everyone that mattered. And the McHale’s mattered.

“The rumor is that my father had something going with one of the McHale girls,” I told him. “I need to know if the youngest McHale is my half-brother.”

A string of curses followed. “Jesus, your father really never learned how to wrap it up.”

He got that right. I wouldn’t be surprised if another half-sibling popped up out of the woodwork.

“I need the information tomorrow.”

I ended the call, turned to my laptop, and powered it up. The moment Google came up, I typed in the names of the McHale’s daughters.

Anya and Sailor McHale. One deceased. The other worked as an established reporter. While there was barely any information on Anya, there was plenty about Sailor. One child, Gabriel McHale. Sailor was the sweetheart of the political world. The media predicted she’d marry the up and coming youngest senator, Aaron Kennedy, who she’d been dating on and off for years.

But it wasn’t that which was most intriguing about the woman.

It was her recently published article laced with contempt for any criminal. And she targeted the Tijuana Cartel.

As I read through her articles, I could hear the voice of her contempt. Each written word was laced with hostility for the head of the cartel and she didn’t hesitate to pull in others that were in the world. Oftentimes, she’d slip in connections of our world and corrupt politicians.

It was clear she was out to get someone. *More than just one person*, I thought wryly.

Curious about the woman with a sharp tongue when writing, I clicked on the reporter's profile. The picture

opened, and a fire flickered in my chest, then ignited into a full blown inferno.

The blonde woman with the hair of freshly fallen snow stared back at me.

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Chapter Eight

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SAILOR

I wiped my sweaty palms on my pants, my fingers trembling with anticipation. It was almost eleven o'clock at night, the humidity still thick in the air and darkness not affording any reprieve.

The row of warehouses lined the port area, darkness providing them the privacy to do things that should never be done. I'd be damned if I'd look the other way. I had pictures of Santiago Tijuana meeting with some prominent D.C. political figures. International shipments that were never recorded with the port or customs. I'd sent my findings to the D.C. police. Nothing. They called it no basis for a warrant. Never mind there were illegal ships docking here every week and battered women being hauled out of them.

Yeah, that wasn't evidence. That was a figment of my imagination.

So I took matters into my own hands. Six months of research. Six months of learning everything there was about the Tijuana Cartel. Determination and redemption was my incentive. I couldn't save Anya, but I'd save every other woman.

From the cartel. From my father. Because that bastard was working with the Tijuana Cartel. I just needed proof.

Six months of research to know how much I needed this. The retaliation. The revenge. The determination to end my father and his associates had me pushing forward and not thinking about the consequences. The aroma of rotten fish and the bay sunk deep into my lungs, the scent fitting this scenario perfectly. I pulled my baseball cap further down my forehead, worried a glimpse of my blonde hair would give me away. It was the reason I dressed all in black.

A flicker of light came through the darkness and my eyes snapped in its direction. Five men stepped out, each dragging two women by their hair. My hands clutched the camera that hung around my neck, wishing that I had a gun. I wasn't the best shot, but I was decent. At least that was what the Ashford brothers claimed.

Whimpers and cries traveled through the humid, heavy air. My heart thundered wildly, threatening to crack my ribs. I took a step back and sunk deeper into my spot, thankful for the barrier and the darkness and raised my camera. I adjusted the lens, letting me see the men's faces. And the faces of the terrified women.

Pain in their eyes was evident even through the lens. I couldn't even fathom the horror they'd been through. I pushed the button, and the clicking of the camera started.

Click. Click. Click.

One of the women was bruised so badly that her eye was swollen shut. But she still fought like a hellcat. She yanked her arm out of the guy's grip and started running. I shot up to my feet, ready to help her when a large hand yanked me back.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

My eyes widened, jerking back and forth between the man gripping me and the woman who lay limp twenty feet away from me. I opened my mouth, ready to start screaming when a large hand came to my mouth.

Using all my strength, I attempted to elbow him in his gut, but he blocked it. Then I went to shove the heel of my

foot into his shin.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” he hissed as I bit into his hand. “I came to kill those fucking traffickers. The Tijuana Cartel has been wreaking havoc on my territory.”

I stilled.

My eyes locked on the face covered by the shadows of the darkness. My gaze skimmed over the hard face and our gazes connected. Grey. Cold. It was then that the meaning of his words slammed into me. He said my territory. This was Nico Morrelli.

Jesus Christ. Did I just get myself into a load of crap?

This man reeked of dominance and control. His storm-cloud eyes were hooded by dark, thick lashes, those gray depths full of secrets.

“I’m going to remove my hand but you won’t scream,” he demanded in a hushed tone. “Understood?”

I swallowed hard then nodded. And all the while, my breathing and heartbeat thundered erratically. I was scared. I’d always been the one scared of my own shadow. Anya went through hell and she was always braver than me.

Slowly he removed his hand off my lips, his eyes never wavering from me. As if he anticipated I’d do something stupid.

“Good,” he praised. “Now, let’s save these women and kill those men.”

“No.” The word left my lips before I thought better of it. Bossing around the head of the Maryland mafia wasn’t smart.

He cocked his eyebrow. “No?”

I took a deep breath in. I couldn’t believe I was standing up to the freaking head of the mafia. I’d be stupid not to know who or what Nico Morrelli was.

“We get the women out,” I said with the confidence I didn’t exactly feel. “I get the evidence so we can put the

Tijuana Cartel behind bars. They're working with someone in D.C., and I need them to reveal that connection."

"Interesting," he murmured. He actually considered my words. "You know who?"

I have a good idea. "Not sure," I ended up answering.

He didn't believe me, but he nodded regardless. "Take pictures. Then my men and I will get the women out."

So I did. I snapped pictures of all the Tijuana Cartel faces. Right along with Santiago Tijuana, the head of their cartel.

"Okay, now let me have this camera," Nico Morrelli demanded. I eyed him suspiciously. "Don't worry, you'll get it back and all the photos will be there. I don't want you to snap evidence against me and my men."

I cleared my throat. It had crossed my mind, although I wouldn't admit it. I valued my life too much. I hoped he couldn't see the truth in my eyes. The nerves ratcheted up my pulse, the hunger for revenge eating at me. Sometimes you gotta make a deal with the devil to make things happen.

So be it.

I handed him my camera. "Stay here. Once we get all the men secured, I could use your help with the women. I have a shelter where they'll be safe."

"Okay," I breathed, unfamiliar around ruthless men like this. But I didn't really have a choice. I came alone.

I wouldn't miss out on a chance to set those women free so I opted to trust this man. If only for the night. Tonight's war wasn't with Nico Morrelli. It was with Santiago Tijuana and my father.

The next twenty minutes were a whirlwind. Nico and his men moved with an efficiency and familiarity I'd never have in situations like this. It made me realize how stupid I was to think coming here alone was smart.

I watched Nico and his men shift through the darkness, I tried to read their body language, worried whether they'd

betray me and the women. Some were dressed for combat while others wore three-piece-suits. And still they fought efficiently.

As the fighting and gunfire ended, I stood up from my spot and rushed through the dark parking lot. The moment I got close to Nico Morrelli, my footsteps immediately halted. A bulky man in a suit blocked my path.

“Excuse me.” I attempted to sidestep him only to have him counter my move. He obstructed my access to Nico. “Move out of my way.”

Hard blue eyes met mine and the man’s lips thinned in displeasure. “I don’t think so.”

“Fucking Tijuana got away.” I heard one of the men shout.

“No matter,” Nico told him. “I have the place surrounded. Someone will pick him up, and then we’ll drop him right at the police station, along with some hard evidence.”

I grinned. Nico Morrelli showing up was definitely a good thing. Annoyed that the hulk of a man was still obstructing my path, I glared at him.

“I said, excuse me,” I hissed.

“Let her through,” Nico ordered. “After all, she’ll be the one to put Santiago Tijuana behind bars. It was her that triggered the alarm and brought us here to set these women free.”

Well, damn. Maybe one or two mobsters in this world might be decent men after all.

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Chapter Nine

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RAPHAEL

I drummed my fingers on the steering wheel, while keeping my eyes on the young reporter. She was on her daily five-mile jog. That fucking snow white hair! It was up in a smooth, long ponytail, and it swished back and forth with each step.

She had a gorgeous body. The kind that had passersby give her a double take. Yes, that hair of hers was unusual, but it was so much more than just that.

The way her soul glowed through those stunning blue eyes pulled at my strings. Just like the first time we met. And like the true devil, I wanted to steal her soul and keep it with me forever.

I have been stalking her from afar for days. I was tempted to approach her, speak to her face-to-face. But it wasn't time. Not yet.

Besides, the Feds had her watched. She had agents tailing her ever since her photographs were entered into evidence against the Tijuana Cartel and the bust over the women they smuggled into Nico's territory.

My eyes roamed over her sweat-slicked body and exercise clothes that hugged her like a second skin. She was gorgeous. From that thick, high ponytail down to her slim, toned legs. Every morning, she ran the same path

around the D.C. streets, her steps fueling her speed. Her forehead was slick with wisps of blonde hair plastered from sweat and her skin flushed. She seemed to be in the zone, her gaze distant and her smile curving into a reserved, absent smile to passersby.

According to the file I got from Nico Morrelli, she was close with Aurora Ashford and her brothers and her friend Willow. My eyes flickered to the file that showed her best friends, but it quickly drifted back to Sailor. Nico had information on her visits to her family which were non-existent. She kept her distance from her parents, and coincidently, her connection with them was severed right around the time her son was born.

My half-brother.

The revelation still seemed startling. Even after weeks of knowing it, I struggled to come to terms with it.

I watched Sailor McHale's gaze roam the street. It was as if she sensed me, but she never noticed me. I never followed her in the same car. Other times, I jogged too, but I always kept my distance. Although she sensed someone was close. She'd look over her shoulders too often to be an accident.

She approached the coffee shop. The same one she stopped at every morning and met up with her on-again, off-again boyfriend. If they weren't off-again, I'd ensure he became a permanent non-boyfriend.

As if on cue, the tall figure stepped out of the coffee shop, his striped Brioni suit immaculate and in such contrast to her exercise gear, it was almost comical.

I hated how they looked like a picture perfect couple. At least on paper. Sailor McHale and Aaron Kennedy.

The descendants of the two most prominent political families. Their match didn't seem to surprise anyone. The only thing that surprised people was that they'd been on and off for years, rather than tying the knot. The guy was a

clean cut guy, an up and coming figure in the political world.

Yeah, he'd never have her again. I'd fucking ensure it.

My eyes flickered to the tall figure that appeared to have just come off the runway. The guy was too pretty, almost as if he competed with Sailor in being the prettiest. Yeah, he'd lose that one because she trumped him by a mile.

I fucking hated that she seemed to have a type and it wasn't anything like me. If he was anything to go by, she definitely had a thing for pretty boys from Ivy League universities and rich families. Little, self-entitled pricks. I bet her world was full of those.

Truthfully, I didn't know why I disliked him. Okay, jealousy was a part of it. But there was more to it than just that. Maybe it was because in all the pictures and history between Sailor and the blonde cabrón, Gabriel was never part of it. The rumor was that it was the reason for the on and off relationship. I fucking hated the idea that my half-brother would be around someone like that - someone who thought himself too good to include a fucking kid as part of his relationship.

"How many of your secrets does he know?" I wondered out loud as I tapped my fingers against the steering wheel. Tap, tap, tap.

Nico Morrelli's deep dive into Sailor McHale and her sister revealed some interesting information. While Sailor was the legitimate daughter of Governor McHale and his wife, the older daughter wasn't. She was the illegitimate daughter of his wife and the result of a secret affair she had prior to marrying him.

My phone buzzed. It was Nico.

"Yes?" I answered.

"You're tailing Sailor McHale."

I guess nothing should surprise me when it came to Nico, especially not when it happened in his territory. And D.C., Maryland, and Virginia were his territories.

“Yes.”

He chuckled. “What’s your interest in her anyhow?” he questioned. “Outside of the little brother. First, the file on all the McHale family. And now you’re following her around.”

I didn’t comment nor bother to elaborate.

“She hired my company for extra surveillance,” he added, when I remained quiet. “You’re discreet, but not that discreet, Colombian.”

“Fuck off, Nico.”

He chuckled, full of amusement. “Here I’m doing you a favor and you’re hurting my feelings.”

I rolled my eyes. “The only one that can hurt your feelings is your gorgeous wife. How are your wife and kids, by the way?”

“Good. You should give marriage a try. It’s a blissful experience.”

I snickered. “I never thought I’d hear the word ‘blissful’ coming out of your mouth.”

He chuckled. “It’s time for you to get married and have little bambinos running around.”

“I’ll pass,” I grumbled. “What’s up with you and Sailor now? Best buddies?”

I could practically hear him snicker over the line. “She did me a solid. Unlike her family, she’s a good woman.”

An idea sparked in my mind. Sailor was a good woman. I saw it in the eyes of that young woman during our first dance. A soul like that remained good. I wanted her eight years ago. Maybe this was a sign that she was meant to be mine all along.

Yes, my Italian friend might be right. I should give marriage a try.

“She has no connection with her parents,” Nico continued. “That alone tells me she’s a good woman.”

I knew what he meant. All the glitter and diamonds couldn’t hide the rot of her prominent family. The McHale

family attended the right schools, schmoozed with the right kind of people, and made deals that made them richer. Without any consideration of the consequences to the average Joe.

Yes, my friends and I were criminals but even we had higher standards than them.

And I suspected somewhere along the way Sailor learned that.

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Chapter Ten

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SAILOR

It had been weeks since the Tijuana bust in the Port of Washington. The feds tailed me, and Santiago Tijuana and his crew were behind bars and awaiting trial. Yet, I couldn't shake off the feeling that I was being watched. By whom, I had no idea, but I'd stake my life on it.

So I kept my guard up. I learned a long time ago that depending on someone else to keep me safe was dumb, so I hired a surveillance company to ensure my workplace and our home building had extra monitoring.

Not that the Ashford brothers had flimsy surveillance on the building, but this was extra, to ensure my own piece of mind. The surveillance showed nobody suspicious. Yet, it didn't do anything to settle my rattled nerves. If anything, it had me even more on edge.

My eyes flickered to Gabriel who sat at the table eating breakfast while reading a comic book. Comics had always fascinated him. Setting my eyes on him, he raised his head and our eyes connected.

Blue eyes were our only similarity. But while mine were light, his were dark blue, reminding me of the darkest oceans. He was a good kid - kind, compassionate, and loyal.

Anya would be proud of him, regardless of whose biological son he was.

“Are you okay, Mom?” Gabriel was also a worrier. He always worried about me, Aurora, and Willow.

I told him he had the roles reversed and to stop worrying. Yet, it was like it was ingrained into his DNA. Maybe the Ashford brothers’ overprotective streak rubbed off on him.

“Of course, my little man,” I assured him. No matter how much I tried to protect him, I worried that the past would catch up to us. And then I feared how I’d explain to him how he came to be. “Five minutes, and we need to get going.”

I had to be back in the courthouse today for my big testimony. Of course, I only gave the Feds and police half of the information on what happened that night. I never brought up the name of Nico Morrelli and his crew, who captured the Tijuanas then set the women free. It turned out Nico has had a shelter for years that assisted women who were victims of human trafficking.

I couldn’t quite decide whether to admire the man or fear him.

Laying my phone into the bin, I pushed it through the security cameras. A cold rush ran from my nape down the length of my spine and my body tingled in awareness. A loud thump came from behind me. Items being thrown into a bin. I was about to turn around to see who was behind me when the guard’s voice stopped me.

“Miss McHale,” the guard, Mr. Roberts, greeted me.

I’d spent so much time at the courthouse that I knew each guard’s name, their wives’ names, and what was going on in their lives.

“Mr. Roberts, how nice to see you. Has your wife had the baby yet?”

“Any day now,” he chuckled.

I grabbed my phone and continued on. I just couldn’t shake off the feeling that things weren’t going exactly the way the Feds planned or hoped. Of course, they refused to share information. I worried about how far my father’s reach was. If he managed to set the Tijuana Cartel free, they would come for me. And Gabriel.

The panic bubbled deep inside me but I forced myself to swallow it. It’d do me no good to lose my shit now.

I strode down the large, marble lobby, heading for the courtroom that would hold the trial. One of the agents waved me over and I met him halfway.

“What’s going on?” I asked with dread pooling in my stomach. Both of the agents attempted to keep their composure, but the look in their eyes spoke of panic.

“Bail has been set for Santiago Tijuana.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” I hissed. “Are you sure? There was supposed to be no bail.”

They both shook their heads. “No, he was bailed out.”

I wasn’t surprised. Disgusted, yes. But not surprised. I felt it in the pit of my stomach the whole week.

“You fucking idiots,” I spat out. “What happened to no bail?”

“We have to move you and your son,” Daniel, the older agent, responded, unaffected by my insult.

“Move me where?” I snapped. “These men have connections everywhere. It was your job to keep them behind bars.”

“We need to leave now,” Daniel insisted.

If these two thought I’d entrust my son to them, they truly were idiots.

“Just give me a minute,” I grumbled, agitation evident in my voice. I waited until the two agents walked away from me, their eyes darting back to me every so often.

Once there was enough distance between us, I started walking down the large, long hallway, toward the courtroom where the hearing was designated to take place, and all the while, contemplating taking the back exit to get the hell out of here.

The same awareness rushed down my spine and a large shadow approached to my right when I lost my footing.

“Fucking heels,” I cursed, my hand instinctively wrapping around an offered arm and gripping the sleeve of expensive material.

He chuckled. “Not a fan of heels?”

Was it wrong that the way the words rolled off his tongue in a sensual way did something to my insides? I could hear his Hispanic roots in each syllable and the depth of his voice. Yet, I didn’t panic. Something about his voice was soothing. Familiar even.

“Fuck, no,” I grumbled.

Straightening up, I glanced to my right and his gaze caught mine. Heavy. Blue. And very familiar.

Something burned in his eyes that spoke of a harsh life and ruthlessness. Cruelty. His whole presence touched my skin with a dangerous awareness and recognition slammed into me with violence and terror.

Aurora was right. Gabriel looked just like the Santos men. Because there was no mistake who stood in front of me. Raphael Santos. In his full glory.

I held my breath as I received the full weight of his stare. Did he find out about Gabriel? Did he come for us?

Remaining still, I stared at that beautiful face. Those eyes that held glimmers of light, pulling me in so I could drown in them. The devil with blue eyes.

Diablo.

The word screamed in the back of my head. Why? I had no idea. My eyes flickered to his hands and that was when I saw it. The tattoo on his hand. Diablo.

Something pricked in the back of my mind. A hazy memory. A dance.

I shook my head. It couldn't be. It was a ridiculous notion. This man resembled Gabriel - that was where the familiarity started and ended.

Lifting my eyes back to his face, our gazes clashed. My skin heated and my breath caught in my lungs. His eyes coasted down my body, and although I wore a black, pencil skirt and light blue crew neck top, I felt naked under his stare.

Frustration flickered in my chest at my body's response to him.

Something dark and lazy played in his eyes and my heart leapt under his attentive scrutiny. I held my breath. We both remained silent, eyeing each other as if we measured each other's strengths and weaknesses. I had so goddamn many that sometimes I feared I'd drown in them.

And Raphael Santos - according to all the research I'd done on the Santos family, had none. The individual known as Diablo was feared by his opponents for his ruthlessness. But his men loved him and followed him blindly, which was the opposite from Lombardo Santos, his father. The latter instilled fear in his own men and often executed even them. While Raphael Santos protected his own men, unless they betrayed him.

The question was what he considered a betrayal. There was no knowing it, not unless you worked for him. And the man was excellent at keeping his public information hidden. Even his pictures.

Aurora described him pretty accurately and she was absolutely right. Gabriel resembled his half-brother. The question was whether I should be terrified.

I masked my expression, worried he'd find my weaknesses and exploit them. Maybe even steal my soul.

I inhaled slowly then released my breath.

“Thank you.” I couldn’t thank him while holding his expression so I averted my gaze.

“Is everything alright, Miss McHale?” Daniel, the agent’s voice, penetrated the fog in my brain. Jesus, if it took them that long to get to me, they couldn’t keep Gabriel and I safe.

“Yes.”

I took a step away from the man, needing space to breathe and think. He was too much. His broad shoulders and stance oozed confidence. Crisp, black lines of his suit. His dark hair was shaved short on the sides and faded with an expert hand. There wasn’t a single part of him that wasn’t flawless, but it was his face and those blue eyes against olive skin that made it hard to look away.

I had to get out of here. Get away from him.

Turning back in the direction I came from, I started to rush out of there, but I barely took three steps when a massive explosion ripped through the building. Glass shattered and screams filled the air.

My knees met the hard, marble floor, but before the rest of my body hit the ground, a large body covered mine just as another explosion rocked the building. A hail of shattered glass and flying debris fell all around us.

“What’s happening?” I croaked, trying to push against his hard body sheltering me. I didn’t even know why I asked. The Tijuana Cartel caused this. There wasn’t an ounce of doubt in my mind. "I have to get to my son."

I couldn’t let anything happen to Gabriel.

"I can protect you and Gabriel."

He knew my son’s name. My mouth and my heart froze. There was my confirmation. He knew about Gabriel.

His dark blue eyes burned with blue flames that consumed everything in their path. The simple words sent shock waves through me, and I stared at those dark sapphires.

Without waiting for my response, he reached inside his pocket and yanked a phone out, then pressed the call button.

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Chapter Eleven

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RAPHAEL

The moment Caine answered, I barked, “Meet me at the right exit.”

Hanging up, I shoved my phone back into my pocket and another explosion shook the building. I kept her pinned underneath me, my body shielding her from most of the debris. The building shook; screams and shouts echoed in the distance. She shifted and ground against my pelvis. It took all my years of training to keep my expression blank.

It wasn’t her intent to turn me the fuck on, but fuck, I was ready to shove her panties aside and thrust into her.

Wrong fucking time. To say the moment wasn’t right was an understatement.

We had to get the hell out of here. Before the cops, Feds, and first responders swarmed this place. Yet, I remained immobile, painfully aware of her soft curves underneath me and my dick deciding to play.

I gripped her hips and met her gaze. “Stop moving,” I gritted. “Unless you’re attempting to fucking seduce me in the middle of this shit.”

Her blue eyes flashed with disdain. “Sorry, fucker. You’re not my type.”

No surprise there. After all, I’d seen her prissy, pampered, sometimes boyfriend.

“Then stop grinding yourself against my cock,” I ordered.

Her lips parted, that luscious full mouth only inches away, tempting me to sink my teeth into them. And the fucking look on her face set fire to my groin. Her body felt too good underneath me. It was the kind of body meant to seduce, to lick, and to savor. To fucking obliterate. I wanted to see how loud she screamed in the throes of passion.

Because she would scream, regardless if she was a screamer or not.

Her silvery hair sprawled over the debris covered floor gave her an appearance of a fallen angel thrown into the pits of hell.

A hell that this devil ruled. The dominion where I reigned.

“Are you going to fucking stare at me all day?” she snapped, the annoyance in her voice clear.

“I might,” I mused. Who could blame me? She was absolutely stunning.

She glared at me, those wide, ocean blues glittering as her gaze narrowed to slits. I was tempted to remain on top of her just a bit longer, either to annoy her or just to relish in the feeling of her luscious curves underneath me, screaming for me to taste.

And holy fuck, her scent. It filled the air around me and seeped through my skin. It was that same primrose scent I remembered. Why in the hell didn’t she remember me?

The sound of distant gunfire dragged my mind out of the gutter and to the reality of our situation.

I jumped up to my feet and then hauled her up by her arm.

“Let’s go,” I ordered her. “There’s no time to waste.”

She jerked out of my hold. “I’m not going anywhere with you,” she hissed. “Get the hell away from me.”

I gritted my teeth, unaccustomed to being disobeyed. Especially from a woman. I was all for strong and

independent, but not reckless and stupid. She opened her mouth to say something but the sound of guns kept nearing so I interrupted whatever words she planned on uttering.

“If you want to live,” I told her harshly, “-you’ll fucking tag along. If you’d rather die, be my guest. But my brother won’t.”

Sheer terror entered her ocean gaze.

Fuck, so much for talking it through rather than scaring the shit out of her. That plan went up in smoke. There we go - the mistake I’d made with Isabella repeated all over again.

Before I could assure her I meant neither her or my brother any harm, there was another loud explosion, the force of it sending us flying through the air. Her scream shattered through the chaos and her hands reached for me. Rolling sideways, my arms closed around her slim waist, using my body as a shield.

“Why can’t the fuckers just take their punishment?” she muttered. “They’re criminals and belong in jail.”

I shook my head at her logic. Her way of thinking was still just as strange as the day I met her.

Before I could ponder further on it, the roar of another explosion sounded off somewhere. A round of gunfire shot through the air and followed closely by a loud crash.

We crouched down and kept close to the walls while I kept her behind me, to ensure she stayed out of the line of fire. There were bodies everywhere, some hurt and others dead. I peered around the corner to ensure it was clear to continue.

“Clear,” I whispered.

Then we started moving through the debris. And some dead bodies. Sailor’s gasp had me turning my head just in time.

One of Tijuana’s men had a gun trained on me. Acting on instinct, I pushed Sailor behind me, while at the same time aimed my gun at him. *Bang.*

Straight between his eyes. He was dead.

Another fucker joined him and I shoved Sailor onto the ground, my body covering hers. Shots rang through the air. He kept trying to aim but thankfully a large pile of debris covered both of our bodies while my body sheltered hers.

When the gunfire stopped, I heard the familiar click. He was reloading. This was my chance. I lifted my head and aimed.

Bang.

Another dead soul to stain my record.

My eyes lowered back to the woman underneath me.

“Five steps and we’re out of here,” I attempted to comfort her. Her breathing was slightly erratic and fear was clear on her face. “Are you good?”

A terse nod and wide eyes met my gaze. And all the while her fingers clutched my suit. As if she needed an anchor from spiraling into this thing that happened to be my life.

The underworld where war, guns, and threats were part of an everyday life.

She’s part of it now, whether she liked it or not.

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Chapter Twelve

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SAILOR

Somehow I knew this day would come.

Except that after years of nothing, I became too confident. I thought the possibility of any Santos family member ever finding out about Gabriel was non-existent. How could I have been so damn stupid?

I took a deep breath in, then exhaled. I had to calm down. The hard pounding of my heart actually hurt my chest. It wouldn't bode well for anyone if I had a heart attack. Whether from fear or this man's affect on me, I didn't know.

Though I had to give credit to the man. While the panic had me on the verge of losing my shit, Raphael Santos was dead calm. Black spots swam in my vision and my heart pounded against my chest, while Raphael almost looked bored as hell. Fear and panic danced through my skin. But not this man. This gorgeous specimen of a man that I detested wasn't afraid at all.

Like a devil loving his chaos.

There was no mistaking who *he* was. The man that shielded me with his body. It was a face I saw in a boy every single day. At least there was some relief in that revelation. With such a strong resemblance, there was no chance that Gabriel was my father's son. *Right?*

I hoped so. Science was never my strong suit, but I had to trust my gut. It screamed that Gabriel was indeed a Santos. Their resemblance was frankly frightening. Gabriel was a mini Raphael.

“How come there are no pictures of you on the internet?” I blurted out. Okay, not very diplomatic or even the best time for the question, but it was a way to distract myself from the fact that I could die today.

He glanced at me and his mouth twitched into something resembling a half-smile.

“We have a mutual friend who wipes out all my images on the internet.” My eyebrows shot up, probably meeting my hairline at this point. Raphael Santos and I certainly didn’t have mutual friends. “Nico Morrelli,” he clarified.

A silent O formed on my lips. “I wouldn’t exactly call him a friend,” I said.

Although, he did save my ass that night.

“He’ll be heartbroken,” he teased and I shot him a narrowed look. “He likes you.”

The chaos surrounded us. The sounds of sirens traveled through the air. Whimpers. Cries.

“I’m not into mobsters,” I grumbled under my breath. It wasn’t the best time to have this conversation and made absolutely no sense. Yet, here I was entertaining him.

I thought I heard him mutter ‘Too bad’ but I couldn’t be sure.

“He’s happily married,” he retorted dryly. “Besides, he’s not the one for you.”

It was on the tip of my tongue to ask who’s the one for me then but instead, I rolled my eyes. It wasn’t smart to open that door with this man.

“So what does he do? Hide all your images on the internet?” I questioned, still curious to understand how Raphael was able to hide so efficiently.

There were shots fired in the distance. My head whipped in its direction worried about a stray bullet.

“Pretty much. It’s safer for everyone that way.”

It made sense then that the Santos family members barely ever showed up in the papers. And their images were pretty much non-existent on the internet.

It probably worked in their favor because they were able to move among the general public without being spotted. And those darn feds were supposed to protect me from the cartel. Any fucking cartel. And here I had a leader of one laying right on top of me.

Literally!

I wondered if I’d get myself into more trouble if I just dug the mace out of my purse and sprayed this guy’s gorgeous face with it. You know, just to make him a tad bit less attractive. Though it wouldn’t take away from his hard, muscular body.

Jesus Christ. I had lost my brain somewhere in this explosion.

“Are you done with your questions?” he asked, amused. “Should we get going before we start getting shot at again?”

The man was like a heating blanket, turned up to the highest voltage. A large, muscular body covered me as debris fell all around us. And the only damn thing I could think about was that I hadn’t made a will and that this guy was so fucking hot.

I was an idiot.

He was refined and deadly. His breathing didn’t even speed up, while I panted here ready to pass out.

From fear or lust, I wasn’t sure.

Everywhere our bodies touched made my skin sensitive, scrambling my senses. Confusing me. The way his strong body pressed against mine, his solid wall of muscles pushed against my soft ones. It fucking turned me on.

Such bad timing, Sailor. I scolded myself.

Of all the fucking times for my body to wake up from its dormant behavior, it decided to respond and get all hot for

this man.

For Raphael fucking Santos!

A soft groan left my lips and those blue eyes that appeared even brighter against that dark, olive skin snapped to me. Jesus, each time I looked at him, I swore my panties caught fire. He wasn't only tall, handsome, and well-built. But something about his firm jaw adorned with a shadow of stubble and that dark hair just rattled something deep inside me.

There was just something about him that struck me as very familiar. Like a long lost memory that I couldn't quite hone in on.

My brows furrowed as I searched through my mind when his voice interrupted. "You hurt?"

The edge to his voice sent shivers down my spine and his hand tightened around me. His hot breath on my skin, his warmth and masculine scent had my body going into some kind of overdrive. He smelled so damn good, it made me want to nuzzle my face into his neck and lick his skin. Like Aguardiente, this crazy black licorice alcoholic drink I tried once. Yes, he smelled good, like all warm hot-blooded male.

Another groan.

God, why a mobster? My body should have reacted to a nice, decent man. To Aaron Kennedy, for example. Everyone expected that union. It was the right move, everyone said. Well, everyone but my best friends. The truth was that Aaron and I never really dated. At least not in the classical way. We got along well enough. He never attempted to have sex with me and that alone made him the perfect boyfriend. When he needed dates for official, political occasions, I'd be there for him and likewise. The media made their own conclusions and neither one of us bothered contradicting them. Yes, he'd kiss me and we attempted to fool around once or twice, but it was awkward. I wasn't experienced but I could tell he was uncomfortable. Maybe he could

sense panic each time he touched me; I didn't know. Either way, we never discussed it.

Regardless, I couldn't be getting all hot and horny for a mobster. I'd made it my mission to take them down. Not sleep with them.

Although-

Cut the shit, Sailor, I scolded myself.

"Sailor," he gritted. "Are. You. Hurt?" His voice was deep, velvety, and so masculine. I could only imagine how good it would sound as he-

I cut the train of my thoughts. It was definitely going in the wrong direction. This man wasn't my type. Not by a mile.

Yet my body couldn't seem to process that message.

"No. I'm fine."

He stood back up again and helped me up. His arm wrapped around my waist, his eyes alert on the situation around us. The damn courthouse was in disarray. Screams, sirens, and the occasional shot in the distance. I had a bad feeling about this.

"Let's get out of here." He nudged me to the left. His eyes lowered to my feet and I followed his gaze. Damn heels! "Want me to carry you?"

My brows shot up.

"Like over your shoulder?" Then realizing what just came out of my mouth, I shook my head. "No. I'm fine. Just another day on the job."

Idiot! Stop talking. He could probably see the terror on my face. After all, Anya always said I had a lousy poker face.

Thankfully, he didn't comment. He put his hand on the small of my back and nudged me forward. His palm pressed against me sent a shiver through me. My brain couldn't process it. My body was just reacting unlike ever before. This was bad. So fucking bad.

But recognizing that at this moment, he might be the only one who could help me out of this building, I followed.

It took us less than five minutes and my hands gripping this man's sleeve to make it through what looked like a war zone. It wasn't an easy task in three inch heels. This guy, on the other hand, looked right at home in this disaster, even wearing an expensive, custom made three-piece-suit and some fancy shoes.

He looked like the handsome devil ruling his domain. *Hell.*

Through the chaos and debris, so many groans, moans, and cries, that nobody paid attention to us. We were two that still managed to walk and weren't bleeding. We didn't need help.

Once outside, lights and sirens screamed through the air with more coming our way. Both of us kept glancing over our shoulder but nobody was following us as we rushed across the parking lot.

An SUV appeared out of nowhere. It pulled over in front of us with screeching tires and still nobody even glanced our way. Two large men jumped out of the car, one wearing jeans and a white t-shirt and another wearing a suit.

"That's her?" Two sets of eyes, one blue and one dark, flickered my way.

"Get in the car, Sailor," Raphael ordered firmly.

I scoffed. "I never said I was going anywhere with you. You got me out of there, thank you very much. Now let's both be on our way."

He actually looked amused. "I don't think so, Reina." My brows scrunched. That sounded familiar too. "You and Gabriel are coming with me."

His hand wrapped around my wrist as he attempted to lead me to the vehicle. If I got in, all would be lost. So I did the only thing I knew. In one swift move, just the way Royce Ashford, my best friend's brother, taught me, I shifted my body towards him and kneed him in the balls.

It took all of a fraction of a second, but it felt like it took minutes. Pain flashed across Raphael’s expression while his bodyguards stared confused. Honestly, I was confused too. I didn’t actually expect it to work.

Then I finally snapped out of it, kicked off my heels and took off sprinting away from them. The end destination was my son’s school. Risking a glance over my shoulder, I caught Raphael’s form hunched over, cussing like a sailor in Spanish while holding on to his balls.

Adiós, amigo, I thought smugly.

I couldn’t help a self-satisfied smirk. Unfortunately, Raphael raised his eyes at that very moment and caught my expression. The look he gave me promised retribution.

Although, I couldn’t understand why my body shuddered in delight.

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Chapter Thirteen

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RAPHAEL

Madre de Dios.

She kicked me in the balls. Fucking hard too. She better not have impacted my ability to have children. Not that I strived for any. Not after the fucked up way I grew up under my father.

The woman was supposed to be sophisticated. Not a fucking wild cat. Despite it, if my balls weren't aching, I'd be hard for the blonde woman with a filthy mouth right now. Yeah, fucked up priorities.

I'd make her pay though. For kicking me in the nuts and for that smirk she gave me as she glanced over her shoulder, running like the devil himself was chasing her. I guess I was the devil.

Next time, it'd be me smirking.

"Does it really hurt as bad as they say?" Caine questioned and I narrowed my eyes on him. It was so much worse that I feared my voice would come out sounding like a girl. "You don't have to answer," he assured me. "I can see you're in pain."

"Would you like me to demonstrate?" I gritted, shoving him out of the way and getting into the car. "Get in the fucking car so we can get the woman before she gets my brother killed."

“Or herself,” Caine added unhelpfully, grinning like an idiot that he was.

“I don’t give a shit about her,” I said coldly. *Lies.* “The woman’s recklessness is putting Gabriel at risk, and I won’t tolerate that.”

Caine looked like he didn’t believe me but he said nothing else. Instead, he got in next to me and Diego started driving.

“Where to?” he asked. “The kid’s school or the condo first.”

“School.”

My guess would be she’d go after her son first. Though he wasn’t her biological son. Sailor adopted her nephew and I had to admit, it made me admire and respect the woman. She was barely eighteen when her sister, Anya, gave birth. Normally, she wouldn’t have been qualified to adopt so young, but the Ashford connections stretched wide and deep.

I thought back to my own mother. She drowned her sorrows with white powder and alcohol. She was a good woman, until she wasn’t. She really *tried* to fill in cracks. But the drugs and her avoidance of reality interfered.

There were so many nights I had to pick her up off the floor, her own vomit staining her hair. My brother and father would kick her out of the way, cursing her in Spanish, but I’d learned somewhere along the way never to kick a dog while it's down.

But with the lack of my mother’s presence and nurturing, it left me to grow up under the influence of my father. There hadn’t been a moment during my life where I didn’t fear I’d become his clone.

The last time I saw my mother filled my mind, the memory that would haunt me until I died.

I followed the maze of the hospital corridors until I reached the room. This wasn’t a rehab, as my father called it. He’d committed my mother to an institution. My father

had her tucked away in Montana. He called it a wellness retreat when it was actually a mental institution. He fucking loved tormenting her.

I intended to get her out of here. It took me some time but I found her. She'd spent a month here, and knowing my mother, it felt like a year for her. Especially when my father visited. His regular once a week torment session.

My brother Vincent had been dead for several years now. Unfortunately, it turned Father's attention to my mother and other women. He wanted another heir - to secure the Santos line. The fucker didn't like that I refused to operate like him.

I turned the corner to find my father's men stationed outside the door. Without a second thought, I aimed my gun and pulled the trigger. Two bullets a piece. Both dead.

I made my way into the room. It was set up as an apartment but it was still a sanitarium. Fucking bastard. He couldn't even let her die in her own home.

One glance at the living room told me she wasn't in front of the television. It was usually what she did when she was high and my father was more than happy to supply her with drugs. I continue through the room and the kitchen. Still nothing. Not that I was surprised. I hadn't seen my mother in the kitchen since I was a small boy.

The kitchen opened up onto a balcony. The door was open, the chilled air of Montana freezing this entire apartment. It was another form of punishment. My mother hated the cold, like a true Colombian princess she preferred hot weather.

And in her old age, it bothered her arthritis.

I stepped onto the balcony and I froze. My mother stood on the ledge of the balcony, her frail form in a wedding gown and her ebony black hair flowing in the wind. It would seem all my mother's wardrobe was brought in too, along with the wedding dress she kept.

Jesucristo. Jesus Christ. Why in the fuck was she wearing a wedding gown?

“Mamma, come down from there,” I told her softly, trying not to startle her.

She didn’t even move. “No, hijo.” She hadn’t called me ‘son’ since I was five. “It’s time to end it all.”

“Yes, come down and we’ll talk,” I rasped. “I want to see your beautiful face, Mamma.”

She laughed. It was a bitter laugh, that spoke of disappointments and many humiliations.

“Raphael, my angel,” she said eventually. “I’m glad your brother Vincent is dead. You’ll turn things around. Make it the way it should be.”

I took another step forward as I put my gun back into my holster. “Come down, Mamma.”

She turned around to face me and that was when I finally saw it. Her face was black and blue. My fucking father must have beaten the crap out of her. I fisted my hands, worried I’d punch the wall and send my mother over the balcony.

I hated the old bastard. Fucking hated him and couldn’t wait to see his cold body hit the ground.

“Mamma, it’s cold out here,” I tried again. “Let’s go inside.”

Her cheeks were bruised, her lip split and her one eye swollen shut. She was in the worst shape I had ever seen her.

Despite the cold, I felt sweat bead on my forehead.

“My angel, don’t ever be like him,” she whispered, as one lone tear rolled down her cheek.

This wasn’t good. She had to be going through withdrawal, and combined with my father’s beating, she had reached her limit.

Grasping the balcony railing, She lifted her one leg over it, then the other.

“Mamma,” I warned, panic evident in my voice. I surged forward but before I could reach her, she pushed away.

“Love you, hijo.”

I watched her slim body flying through the air, her dark hair whipping around, like a dark, ominous cloud and even starker against her white wedding gown.

And just like that, my father managed to kill another good thing in my life.

Sasha Nikolaev killing my father a few years later eliminated the rotten apple of my life. Yes, karma was a fucking bitch.

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Chapter Fourteen

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SAILOR

The cab driver flicked a look in his rearview mirror for the hundredth time.

He probably thought I was unstable. I couldn't blame him. My hair was a tangled mess, my face sweaty and my clothes wrinkled and dirty.

"There was an explosion," I muttered my explanation. He didn't seem to buy it.

I shrugged my shoulders and pulled out my phone, then dialed Royce. He was my favorite Ashford brother, not that I didn't love them all. But he was the closest one to our age, apart from Kingston who was kidnapped way before I met Aurora.

"Yo, girl." And he had a unique way of greeting me.

"Yo back," I greeted him. "I need a favor."

"Say the word, blondie, and you got it." He knew I hated when he called me blondie. He thought it was a frivolous thing but the truth was that I hated it because it reminded me of my father's fucked up convictions. That racist, ignorant bastard.

There was no sense dwelling on the man who gave me life. He'd never change and the only way to deal with him was to bring him down.

For Anya. For Gabriel.

“Could I use your family cabin?” I asked.

“Of course,” he answered quickly. “Is everything okay?”

No. “Yes.”

The Ashfords have done a lot for me and Gabriel. Willow and Aurora helped me raise him. Our friendship was the only reason I graduated college and was able to offer a good life to Gabriel.

I refused to pull them all into this shit. I started it, and I’d finish it.

When he remained quiet, probably pondering whether to believe me or not, I continued, “I just need a little break. It’s been stressful since the article and the Feds constantly on me. Not that I have to worry about them tailing me any longer.”

“They aren’t tailing you anymore?”

“No.” Truthfully, I forgot about them the moment my eyes connected with Raphael.

“That doesn’t seem right,” he grumbled. I could already picture his eyebrows scrunching in displeasure. “Let me put security on you.”

“No!” I blurted, a tad bit too quickly. “No, thank you. I don’t need any security.”

A heartbeat of silence followed.

“Sailor, are you in trouble?”

I scoffed. “No.” God, I was an idiot. I should have Royce ship Gabriel and me somewhere where neither the Tijuana nor Santos Cartel could find us. Except, I couldn’t keep running to the Ashfords for help. They had enough on their own plates.

“Everything is fine,” I assured him. “Gabriel and I just need a little weekend getaway.”

“It’s Wednesday,” he remarked.

“A long weekend getaway,” I muttered.

Two heartbeats of silence.

“Okay,” he caved. “If you say so, but if something comes up and you need help, you call me immediately.”

“Of course,” I promised, although I knew I’d break that vow. “And thank you so much, Royce.”

“You got it, blondie.”

I ended the call just as the cab driver approached my building on the Northwest side of the city. I dug cash out of my purse, shoved a twenty into his palm, and jumped out of the cab.

Thank God I had been paranoid for weeks. I had Gabriel’s and my bag packed in case of an emergency. Well, newsflash. This was a goddamn emergency.

I quickly walked up the path to the building’s entrance where a porter opened the door for me.

“Miss Sailor,” he greeted me.

I smiled, despite the stress and worry swarming every fiber of my being. “Hello, Nigel.”

“You’re home early,” he remarked, his eyes lingering on my clothes that were a mess.

I nodded and rushed into the elevator that just opened. No sense in giving him any pitiful excuse why. He’d repeat it to any Ashford brother that decided to interrogate him.

Once in the condo, I rushed to my room and grabbed the two bags, then strode to the bathroom I shared with my son, and swiped the toiletries into my largest toiletry bag in one swift move.

“And this is how you pack efficiently,” I whispered to myself.

It took me exactly two minutes to change into a pair of jeans and a t-shirt, and slip on my chucks, before I was out the door and out of the building with Nigel’s sharp eyes on me.

Yeah, he’d call the Ashfords.

“Where are we going, Mom?” Gabriel’s excitement shone through his beautiful eyes. The very same shade as Raphael Santos’. I still couldn’t decide how I felt about it. Of course, I was thankful he wasn’t my father’s son, but was it really so much better being a Santos.

“We’re going on an extended weekend vacation,” I told him, hiding my worries behind my smile. I didn’t want him to grow up like Anya and me. Our only carefree moments were when we were away from our parents. “Surprise!” I exclaimed.

His smile turned into a grin. He loved our weekend getaways. Of course, usually they were exactly that. A weekend getaway. Not an actual getaway, but a ‘hide from the mobsters’ kind of vacation.

I got behind the wheel and just as I put the key in ignition, my cell beeped.

I checked the name.

It was Willow. ***Are you okay?***

I glanced at the clock on the dashboard. She was three hours behind me, currently in California. She was supposed to be back today or tomorrow. I was so looking forward to seeing her. Gabriel too. And yet, here we were on the run. From the Santos and Tijuana Cartel.

Talk about shitty luck.

Yes, perfect. You?

Unlike me, Willow had dark chestnut hair that shone with auburn highlights under the sun. She was petite, only five foot three, but her personality made her appear bigger. With her parents’ heritage, she picked up the best traits from both her mother who was Portuguese and her father who was French. The best part was her heart of gold.

Royce said you might be in trouble.

Yep, nothing escaped the Ashford brothers.

Have you heard from Aurora?

I’d been worried about her. After her expedition to Russia and capturing the man that killed her brother, she

hadn’t been the same.

Yes, she’s coming to D.C. I cocked an eyebrow in surprise. Before I could type back, another message came through. ***Attending her father’s fundraiser.***

She hated those. I was surprised her brothers convinced her to attend. ***You’ll be here when she arrives, right?***

I didn’t want her to be alone. ***Where will you be?***

Willow was such a pain in my damn ass sometimes. ***Around.***

Bubbles appeared on my screen, but before she could say another word, I typed a quick, ***Have a safe flight home.***

I clicked send, then turned off the phone and focused on the situation at hand. We needed to get to the Ashford cabin safely. Once there, I was certain nobody could find us. The Ashfords kept top-notch security. I’d lay low until I could figure out what my next steps would be.

Hiding from the Santos and Tijuana Cartel would be a hard thing to do. Especially without money to back me up.

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Chapter Fifteen

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RAPHAEL

I had no doubt the young woman would be rushing to go get her son. The plan was to snatch them and get them to safety. I didn't need to be chasing the woman all over the fucking country.

I had an organization and companies to run.

It took us too long to get to Gabriel's school. Diego was unfamiliar with the illogical layout of Washington, D.C., streets. Fucking Google Maps directions.

I spotted Sailor the second we approached the building of Janney Elementary School on Albemarle in D.C. My lips curved into a smile at her attempt at a disguise. Ripped jeans that hugged her thighs just perfectly. Plain black t-shirt. Chucks. And a baseball hat with the ponytail pulled through. It was her hair that gave her away. It was hard to miss that shade.

Although it would seem the woman had no issues with directions in D.C. because she found time to go home, get her car and change, then get to her son's school while we barely just arrived at our first destination.

"Slow down, Diego," I ordered.

I watched them hustle to her car. A white Volkswagen Jetta. She was smiling at her son as she ushered him into the vehicle. I'd seen pictures of Gabriel. There was no

denying he was a Santos. He had dark hair and blue eyes, but then so did many others. But his facial structure, even his smile, resembled pictures of me as a kid. He didn't look anything like his aunt, or adoptive mother. According to the pictures I'd seen of Anya McHale, he didn't look anything like his biological mother either.

None of that mattered to me. But seeing him smile at Sailor, with a look full of love, had me questioning my plan of pulling him into my world. After all, I didn't want any part of it either. But there was never a possibility of getting out. My saving grace was that I was able to make changes to the organization with my brother's and father's deaths.

Shoving any ridiculous notion of letting Gabriel and his mother roam this world free, I hardened my resolve. It was more dangerous to leave them out in the open. Just as I found out so could my enemies. And if they got their hands on Gabriel, they'd use him as collateral against me. Hurt him.

Back to my original plan of kidnapping mother and son, I barked the order. "We'll follow them to their destination. Then we'll get them."

My plan was to sit and wait for Miss McHale to come and get her son from the elementary school that little Gabriel attended, then grab them both. But in retrospect, it was a dumb plan.

No more fucking around.

I'd take them back to my place. I'd protect them in my territory. I'd teach Gabriel everything he needed to know about our empire and how to survive in this world. It would be up to him when he came of age, whether he wanted to stay in it or not. But he'd be capable of defending himself if someone came after him.

And Sailor… Well, I'd teach that woman something entirely different. But first, I'd have to talk some sense into her. She and Gabriel would have to stay with me. It was the only way to protect them.

“How in the fuck did she get here so fast?” Diego grumbled.

I shrugged. “She grew up in D.C. and probably knows her way around better than the three of us put together.”

I dialed up Caine. “Yeah?”

“Go into the woman’s apartment and pack up all her and the boy’s clothes. Ship it to my place. Don’t get caught.”

Caine could be invisible when he wanted to be. It was his forte.

“You got it.”

I hung up as we waited. Diego did a good job, concealing the car behind another parked car as we watched Sailor get behind the wheel, her attention on her phone. It didn’t take her long and she started the car.

“Let the games begin,” I announced.

We followed her for two hours before Diego started grumbling. “Where the fuck is she going? To No Man’s Land? This is like the wild, wild west.”

I scoffed. “Far from it. We’re still in Maryland.”

“Madre de Dios, who’d want to live here?” Diego complained.

“Well, apparently about three hundred thousand people want to live in Western Maryland,” I snickered.

“Idiots,” Diego retorted.

“Don’t lose the woman,” I warned, noting the distance between her car and ours getting longer.

Ignoring whatever else Diego was muttering under his breath, I dialed Nico. He answered on the second ring.

“Raphael, what can I do for you?”

It was what I liked about the man. No bullshit.

“I need you to pin your location to Sailor McHale.”

His deep chuckle came through the line. “You lost her already?”

“No.” It wasn’t like I’d share with him that she’d kicked me in the fucking balls. “Please keep any incoming threats or inquiries on her monitored.”

“I’m guessing the explosion in D.C. has something to do with her.”

“Santiago Tijuana posted bail.”

“Fuck.”

“Yes, fuck,” I agreed with the sentiment.

“They’ll be after her. She can’t be out there on her own,” Nico grumbled.

I completely agreed. “I’m tailing her, but I want to be aware of anyone else that might be on her.”

“Give me five minutes. I’ll drop an app into your phone. You’ll be able to see everything I do in connection with her.”

“Excellent. Thank you.”

True to his word, my phone dinged and what do you know. The little Miss Sunshine’s end destination flashed on my phone. It would seem we’d find ourselves in the Appalachian mountains.

“We’re going to be enjoying some Appalachian views,” I told my men.

“Normal women run to the beach,” Diego grumbled. “But we couldn’t get one of those.”

I could already tell Diego loved the mountains.

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Chapter Sixteen

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SAILOR

Gabriel was already sound asleep. It had been a long day, exhaustion heavy in my bones, but it was impossible to get rid of the anxiousness inside me. I kept pacing back and forth, the quiet of the cabin almost overwhelming.

The sound of crickets grated on my nerves. The owl hooting made me want to throw something through the air. It wasn't rational. It was fear.

I fucked up. The article I published should have afforded protection. The evidence I provided should have been convincing enough to lock up Santiago Tijuana for life. Then the plan was to negotiate with him - to get evidence against my father.

Instead, I fucked up all the way around. Now, I found myself on the run. Gabriel's safety was on the line, and it was all my fault.

The panic slithered through every cell of me. I had to check on him. Make sure that he was okay. I rushed through the cabin and silently opened the door to the room where he slept.

I peeked my head in to find him fast asleep. He slept with his arms and legs sprawled, a small smile on his face.

My happy boy. I'd keep that smile on his face. No matter what it cost me.

For Anya.

She had protected me, sacrificed her happiness for mine. Father raped her. So many times. Instead of protecting her, he hurt her. I was terrified of the dark, always padding across the hallway barefoot in search of her because being with her offered comfort. It gave me peace. To hear her breathe, to see her sleep.

Except when the monster came. It was the only reason she frowned when I begged her to sleep in her room.

"Wake up, Sailor." My sister's voice held urgency. I loved hearing her voice. It was soft and when she sang me lullabies it made me feel all warm inside. But when she was sad, her throat hurt too much. It would squeeze too tight, she said. So I'd sing to her the songs I learned in Kindergarten. I wanted to make her feel better.

Because I loved her. She never yelled and screamed at me. And she never hit. Mother and Father did. They made us cry; Anya more than me.

"Sailor, wake up." The cold air filled the room and my eyes fluttered open. I blinked my eyes, again and again, confused. "You have to hide."

Fear shot through me and my heart sped up, thundering against my small chest.

The rhythmic slap of shoes across the marble floor echoed through the hallway.

"I'm scared, Anya," I whimpered in a small voice

The sound was getting closer and closer. "Under the bed. Now!" She shoved me under it. "Not a sound, Sailor. No matter what, you stay quiet. Okay?"

My eyes burned, tears streamed down my face and my nose started running. I wiped it with the back of my hand. "I love you, Sail," she whispered.

"I love you too, Anya."

The door creaked and in a swift move, she pulled a blanket down the side of the bed, leaving me in the darkness. Fear was a peculiar thing. It swallowed you, like a black hole, dragging you deeper into the pits of hell.

"There is my whore." I didn't know what the word meant, but I didn't like it. "Do you know how to say whore in Spanish?"

Father's voice was cruel and cold, like frostbite against your skin. Anya must have not answered because Father continued speaking.

"Puta, Anya. Remember that." I didn't understand the words but my little heart hated him so much. I didn't like Mother either. I told her Father was making Anya cry. Instead of helping her, Mother slapped me across my face and called me a liar.

"Get on the bed," he ordered in a harsh tone.

"Please, no." Anya's soft voice was barely a whisper. Her words barely settled through the air before a loud smack rang through the silence. My small hand shot to my face, holding it. I still remembered the pain of it when Mother slapped me. My heart cried for Anya and my mouth opened to scream. But then I remembered Anya's demand. Not a sound.

My free hand covered my mouth.

Squeak. The mattress indented, suffocating me. The space was too small, it was too dark.

"Scream." I hated his voice. I hated ***him****. More than anyone else.*

I bit my lip, tasted blood. Anya would usually kiss my boo boo better but my small heart knew her boo boo was bigger.

"Cry for me, my little whore." The cold, cruel whisper was like an ominous fog surrounding the room, suffocating all the good in this world.

Squeaking from the bed. The covers moved as bodies shifted across the bed and my hiding spot had an opening.

Fingers curled over the edge of the bed, gripping it hard. Ugly fingers. Wrinkled fingers. One of those fingers held the ring with the McHale family crest.

Screams bubbled in my throat, but Anya said to be quiet.

So I bit into my hand. Hard. I felt the pain and heard the noises making my stomach churn. I hated that fucking bed. Hot, salty tears dripped down my chin.

"Scream, damn it."

A cold sweat broke out across my forehead and a tremble started in my hands and spread through my body. My lungs tightened and my heart raced. My fingers curled into fists, my fingernails digging into the palms of my hands.

Breathe, Sailor. I could almost hear Anya's voice mixing with the sounds of the night. I took a deep breath in, letting it swell my lungs and then exhaled slowly. Repeating it again, and again, my heart rate finally slowed.

I glanced at the clock that showed half past eight. I hated the idea that lurked in my mind, but short of asking the Ashfords for money, which I didn't want to do, this was my only other option. Neither Anya nor I had ever had a good relationship with our mother, but she was our mother. She had to care about us at least a little bit. She cried when Anya died and had asked me to come back home on several occasions. It must mean she cared, at least a little bit. Maybe I could appeal to her good nature.

Apprehension twisted in my stomach, the lead in the pit of it warning me, but I ignored it. It was my pride. Flicking another glance at the clock, my decision was made.

My father wouldn't be back home for another hour, assuming he kept the same routine.

I'd ask my mother for help. I needed money. When I walked away from them, I walked away from everything. Money, clothes, inheritance. I had to start from scratch, but thanks to the Ashfords, it wasn't a painful process. It was

only thanks to the Ashford brothers that I survived that first week. That first year.

I'd been happier than ever. Gabriel was safe and such a good baby. My confirmation that I had made the right choice was on his face every day.

I haven't talked to my parents in over seven years. I walked away the day Gabriel was born. When I left the hospital with my sister's baby, it was without a dime to my name, leaving me homeless and possessionless.

I never even had a chance to ask for help. Byron took me in, letting me stay in his penthouse with the baby, while he secured a place for me and the baby to stay. Aurora and Willow left the college dorm and stayed with us. Byron hired a nanny to watch the baby so I could continue college, purchased anything and everything the baby and I needed, and paid the next four years of my tuition.

It was something I'd never be able to repay. There was no way I'd put him in the middle of this. Risk his and his family's lives.

But I needed enough money to disappear.

With a heavy heart, I pressed the call button and listened to the rings, sending my pulse into overdrive.

"McHale residence." I recognized the voice of our old butler, James.

"Hello, James," I greeted him. "It's Sailor."

"Miss McHale, so nice to hear from you." Truthfully, James was the nicest person in the McHale household. I never understood why he stayed, instead of moving on to a more normal family. My parents had to be the most dysfunctional couple to ever walk this earth.

"You too, James. How are you? And your family?"

"They are doing well, thank you. And you and your son?" My heart squeezed that he'd remembered and a tiny flicker of hope ignited in my chest. Maybe my mom kept tabs on us. Otherwise, how would he know?

“He’s doing wonderfully,” I told him. “He’s seven now and so smart. He makes me proud every day.”

James’ soft chuckle traveled over the line. “If he’s anything like you, he’s a remarkable boy.”

My throat clogged, emotions choking it.

“Is my mom around?” I asked.

“Perfect timing. The bridge society ladies are scheduled to arrive in ten minutes.”

God, some things never changed. After all these years, she still ran the bridge society. It was a group of ladies that had no touch with reality and certainly no aspirations. I cringed at the possibility of being stuck in such an empty life. I wouldn’t trade all these years of financial hardship for anything.

“Thanks,” I muttered. My heart hammered against my chest in anticipation, the uncertainty slithering through my veins.

“Hello?” My mother’s voice came through the line. It was cold and reserved. Maybe James hadn’t told her it was me calling.

“Hello, Mother,” I rasped. “It’s me.” Then unsure whether she recognized my voice, I added, “Sailor.”

I was her only living daughter. We should have grown closer, instead our family fell apart.

“Hello, Sailor.” I wasn’t sure what I expected, but it wasn’t this. The tone of her voice suggested civility, but there was no warmth to it. “Where are you?”

Inhaling deeply, I let the breath slowly out.

“I’m safe. At Ashford's place,” I told her vaguely. The Ashfords had many places around the States. “I’m in trouble.” There was no sense in dragging this on. “I-I need money and was hoping I could-” God, why did this suck so much? “I hoped I could borrow ten thousand.”

Silence stretched.

“I need to disappear for a bit,” I explained. “My article about the cartel brought some heat on us and our lives are

in danger.”

The moment I heard her soft snicker, I knew I made the wrong choice.

“I read the article. It’s causing quite a stir.” Her voice was cold. Uncaring. Just the way I remembered it. The nonchalant tone was the very same one she gave me when I ran to her crying, telling her Father was hurting Anya.

Right before she slapped me across the face and forbade me to ever repeat such words. Or else.

Anger simmered inside me. “Aren’t you going to ask how your grandson is?”

“He’s not my grandson.” I could hear disgust in her voice even over the line. “He should have been given up for adoption. He’ll never be a McHale.”

“He’s your own flesh and blood,” I rasped. “He’s my son. He’s the only thing we have left from Anya. How can you even suggest that he should have been given up?”

“He’s a Latino.” My heart iced over, then turned into inferno. The word sounded filthy coming from her.

“He’s a boy,” I shouted through the line. “Your grandson. My son! Nothing more and nothing less.”

“He’s a bastard. A disgrace to our bloodline and our family.”

“The only disgrace is you.” My hands shook with anger. “You and Father. You don’t deserve him. Us. You never did. You fucking failed us. You should have protected Anya,” my voice wobbled. ”You should have protected us from him. Instead, you led us to him like sheep to a slaughterhouse.”

A heartbeat of silence.

“Why did you call?”

“It was a mistake. One I don’t intend to repeat. Ever.” Anger boiled, making my rage and hurt spill through my veins. “Don’t expect to ever hear from me again.”

“You’ll be crawling back to us,” she sneered. “You’re practically there.”

“I’d rather die than crawl back to you.” I’d find another way to protect my son. “You’ll never see me again. And I never intend to see you again. Goodbye, *Cecilia*.”

Because I’d never call that woman my mother again.

Desperate times and all that shit could go fuck itself.

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Chapter Seventeen

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SAILOR

It was hours away from dawn and sleep wouldn't find me.

It had been less than twenty-four hours since I came face-to-face with Raphael Santos. Now, I stared at the dark ceiling, reliving each moment and word spoken. To him. To my mother.

Memories choked me. So did this hate that burned every time I thought of my parents.

How could I have been so stupid? To call my mother. I really fucking hoped she wouldn't tell Father that I called. *Idiot, idiot, idiot*.

And then there was the matter of Raphael Santos. The moment I saw his face, I recognized the features. If that goddamn explosion didn't happen, I would have gotten out of there without any further contact.

He had to be there because of the Tijuana case. In what capacity, there was no knowing.

I was a fool to think I'd be able to chase the cartel story and not cross paths with the notorious cartel member. The Santos Cartel ran the underworld of Florida with connections to South America. Specifically, Colombia since they originated there.

My heart sped up, more than was natural, thinking about the man with blue eyes. It had to be from fear. Yeah, definitely fear. That devil wasn't my type at all.

The sounds of crickets and soft waves of Deep Creek filled the night, but unlike so many times before, I couldn't find peace in those noises. My mind kept turning over every option and every possibility. And coming out empty.

Gabriel and I couldn't stay in this cabin forever. The Ashfords would come through again. If I asked for help, they'd help. No questions. A simple *yes* and they'd be on the move securing our safety.

But I wouldn't forgive myself if I pulled them into this clusterfuck.

It was sort of bittersweet. They were more of a family than my own. They owed me and Gabriel absolutely nothing and yet they always came through. My own parents, on the other hand, never came through with anything but misery.

I should be used to it by now, but it still fucking hurt. It fucking hurt that they refused to acknowledge Gabriel. It hurt that they turned their back on us the moment he was born. To quote my dear mother, "*Because he's a disgrace*."

The same familiar rage flooded my insides. My mother was a disgrace. Both of my parents were. Not an innocent boy. And all because he wasn't up to their fucked up standards. *Don't go there, Sailor.*

For the tenth time tonight, I got out of the bed and padded across the hardwood floor of the cabin to Gabriel's room. As soon as I entered it, the heavy pressure in my chest eased a bit and my lips curved into a smile.

It was that same soothing feeling I got as a little girl when I went to Anya's room.

Despite the fucked up circumstances of how he came to be, Gabriel was the best thing that could have happened to me. He made me see how wrong certain things were. It was he who drove me every day to fight the battles and do the right thing.

I came up to his bed and brushed my fingers over his soft dark curls.

He was tall for a seven-year-old. His dark hair needed a trim. Except, I was bad with scissors and he hated anyone but Willow, Aurora, or I giving him a haircut. We spoiled him a bit, but he deserved it. Every fucking thing. And he would get it.

His foot dangled off the bed, the covers kicked off. That boy was always hot, no matter what time of year. And he clearly wasn't afraid of the monsters that would snatch his foot dangling off the bed.

Unlike me.

I was afraid of darkness and monsters. Because those monsters came in all shapes and sizes. When you least expect it, they strike.

The door creaked and my little heart thundered, threatening to break my chest.

"Anya," I cried, shaking her hand. "Wake up. I hear a monster."

We were both heavy sleepers, but I was enroute to her room when I heard footsteps against the marble floors. I shook her hand again and she barely peeled her eyes open.

"Go to sleep, Sailor."

Another creak.

"Monsters coming," I whimpered and she shot up her bed. It was too late.

She pushed me off the bed, her eyes wide with fear. "Hide," she mouthed.

Yes, the monsters were everywhere. Even among the upstanding citizens of our high society. Like our own father. I firmly shut the ghosts into a closet, unable to deal with them right now. Or maybe I was too afraid.

I'd bet my life that Raphael Santos wasn't afraid. Of fucking anything. He instilled fear, not felt it. I envied him. At least in that regard.

I scoffed softly.

Now that was a first. Envying a mobster who would take my life in a heartbeat without hesitation. Especially after I kicked him in the balls. I'd have to tell that story to Royce one day. He'd be proud.

Although I hoped I hadn't permanently hurt Raphael. After all, he did protect me during the attack and helped me out of that madhouse.

I'd forever remember that face.

It'd be impossible to forget that chiseled face with the most mesmerizing features. Full mouth, carved cheekbones, blue gaze that should terrify me, but from which I couldn't tear my eyes from. And those tattoos. Jesus Christ!

Yet, they fit him. The devil that he was.

That custom, expensive three-piece-suit couldn't hide the devil underneath it. Ruthless. Dangerous. So fucking hot. *No, no, no*. Scratch hot.

Goddamn him. He shattered my life with his appearance. Wasn't it enough that his father destroyed my sister? Our fragile family. She was *everything* to me. Why was this world so unfair? I wished there was more time for the two of us, that we could have grown old together and watched Gabriel grow up to be a good man.

Lombardo Santos took that away from me. Though I was fully aware putting all the blame on Gabriel's father wasn't right. He only finished Anya off. Her pain started many years before him.

Father ensured that. He made her life a canvas of suffering and pain.

Shaking my head, as if that would get rid of all my thoughts, I grabbed a throw blanket and laid down on the couch in Gabriel's room.

Focused on his soft breathing, I finally found my assurance. Hearing his breathing always chased my fears away. Like this nudging feeling that the devil would come in the night and steal my son away from me.

He was all I had left of my sister. So I'd keep watch.

If only I remembered I was a heavy sleeper.

A soft breeze brushed against my cheek, the cool mountain air making its way into the room. The soft morning noises soothed me in my sleep. I groaned tiredly and gripped the covers tighter over me. I needed just a bit more sleep.

It was then that I smelled it. Black licorice, sweet and deadly.

I shot out of bed, forgetting where I was and fell right off the couch. A pair of black boots was the first thing I saw of him.

Fucker found me.

Not even twenty-four hours had gone by and Raphael Santos had found me. My eyes shot to the bed. Empty. Then snapped up, craning my neck to see those stark blue eyes.

"Buenos días," he drawled, his accent smooth and sexy. His deep voice did things to me. I didn't like it.

Fuck his buenos días. And fuck his sexy voice.

"Where is Gabriel?" I hissed, trying to sound brave.

"He's safe."

"Where?" I gritted.

"He's outside with Caine."

I blinked. "Caine? Outside?" He probably thought I was dense.

"Yes, I thought it was best that he doesn't witness this."

My breath caught in my lungs right before my heart jumped into overdrive. *Fear.* It rattled me from deep within. I failed to protect Gabriel. My hands shook and my eyes lowered. I still clutched the blanket around me, barely covering me. Jesus, I'd die in my boy shorts and t-shirt that says bite me.

It made no sense, but I wanted to ask him to let me change.

Christ, he was about to kill me and I worried about my wardrobe.

I swallowed hard, still laying on the floor, as my mind worked vigorously at different scenarios in which I came out of this alive. With Gabriel. Away from this man.

Except, how do you negotiate with a criminal?

"My friends won't be happy to find my dead body in their cabin." *Seriously?* That was the best I could come up with. "They're powerful and-" And what? "And they'll come after you."

His smile held a smugness I didn't like.

"Ah, yes. The Ashfords," he drawled. "Yes, I'm well aware who owns the cabin."

I nibbled on my lower lip, unsure whether I had the upper hand or if he did. He seemed unconcerned with the Ashford influence.

"Leave now, and I won't say anything to them." He threw his head back and laughed. Not exactly the effect I was going for. "Just leave Gabriel and me alone."

He locked eyes with me. I felt inferior, sitting at his feet because I was too astonished to find him here to get myself together.

"I can't do that," he purred, his expression filled with some sardonic amusement.

I swallowed. "But the Ashford family will come after you."

"Let them come."

I should have known the criminal wouldn't be afraid. Especially one that looked so goddamn sexy in his jeans.

"So you're going to kill me?" I choked out, my heart threatening to beat out of my chest. Goddamn it, I wasn't ready to die. I should have known to refuse the Feds when they made me a star witness for the Tijuana Cartel. Damn

it, I was so stupid. That's the last time I refused to listen to my gut feeling.

Crap, there wouldn't be a next time to listen to my instincts.

Raphael's eyes narrowed for a fraction of a second before he wiped his expression to an unreadable mask.

"I'm not going to kill you," he said, keeping his voice even. "Unless you force my hand."

Oh, shit.

"A-and Gabriel?" I whispered, scared he'd separate us.

"You're his mother," he explained. "I won't kill the mother of my only living brother." *Thank God.* "But you'll come with us."

"You can't just take us," I protested. "Gabriel has school. His friends. I have a job."

All excuses and lies. We couldn't go back to our everyday life. The cartel would find us and kill us.

Raphael didn't miss a beat. "You have a job that made you and my brother a target. Didn't you learn in your research that the Tijuana Cartel and Santos family are rivals?"

Fucking hell. That part I fucking missed.

I blinked. "Y-you are?" I croaked.

"Yes," he retorted dryly. "What kind of reporter are you if you don't do your homework?"

This son-of-a-bitch.

Suddenly, all I could see was red and all I could taste was anger. My heart raced with fury and before I knew it, I was up on my feet and my hand flying through the air. Just as my palm was about to make contact with his gorgeous face, he caught my wrist and spun me around.

A breath of air escaped me and my cheeks burned. How in the hell did he move so goddamn fast?

His hand on my skin. His hot breath against my ear. His body pressed against my back. Instantly, the anger evaporated and arousal took its place.

Much to my horror and dismay.

I struggled against him, my butt brushing against his hard body, but it was fruitless. He was much stronger than me and eventually I went still, my heavy breaths filling the room.

“Let go of me,” I hissed, the throbbing between my thighs pulsing with an ache that I hadn’t felt in a long time. No, scratch that. That I had never felt before. I couldn’t understand this reaction to this man. It was a foreign feeling and the only logical explanation was that my attraction to this criminal was the result of my lifelong abstinence.

It was wrong on so many levels, because I hated him. His entire family.

“Don’t try to hit me again, mi reina.” It was a soft and gentle warning, but ruined with the slightest clench of his teeth. “I let you get away with it yesterday. Next time, you won’t be so lucky.”

“Or what?” I breathed.

My sanity was officially in the gutter. I shouldn’t be challenging him.

He pressed his face into my neck from behind and a tremble rocked through every inch of my body.

“Or I’ll have to spank you until you see things my way.” Something between a gasp and moan slipped through my lips and a languid sensation pulled on my muscles. His lips pressed against my ear. Good God, I wasn’t into spanking. *Was I?* “Nothing else to say?”

Confusion battled within me at my own arousal. I hated being manhandled. Most of the time, I hated being touched. And here I was, panting, hyper aware of his every breath and every spot where his body touched mine.

“I despise you,” I spat out. It was all I had.

He was a cold-blooded criminal. *Lethal.* His family was known for their ruthlessness. A long list of killings and human trafficking. I’d heard that they no longer dealt in

human trafficking, but I wasn't sure. Unlike the Tijuana Cartel, the Santos Cartel were notorious for their anonymous and faceless presence among the criminal organizations.

It was the reason I never recognized Lombardo Santos. Anya kept secrets, trying to protect me. Father sold her to Lombardo Santos. To this day, I couldn't understand why. He had plenty of money.

Anya was so scared of Father that she agreed to follow through with his orders. From a thousand miles away. We were in Miami, Father was in D.C. and he still controlled Anya. He terrified her so much that she walked willingly to Lombardo Santos. Aurora, Willow, and I followed right along, not knowing what we walked into.

I just wished she'd told me. We could have run away together. We could have done something. Instead, we witnessed cruelty until Lombardo Santos learned Aurora's last name was Ashford. After he destroyed my sister, he called up her father and like best buddies, those two laughed and joked while the four of us were led out, forever changed.

So yes, I had a vested interest in tearing down all criminals. Including those that hid behind their name and family legacies. I'd worked on tearing them all down, piece by fucking piece. I'd destroy my father for what he did to my sister. He thought he was untouchable. But I'd get him. I refused to perish from this Earth until that bastard paid for his sins.

Our bodies were flush together, his chest to my back and sparks lit beneath my skin each time he shifted. It was like being electrified and relishing in the sensation.

"You don't despise me," he drawled. "You might despise what I represent, but certainly not me."

"Someone is delusional," I snickered. I had no idea when I got this brave. Maybe all I needed was some sleep.

“Then why do I smell your arousal, Reina?” he mocked, his deep voice too close for comfort.

“You smell my disgust, *cariño*,” I spat out.

My fingers twitched, eager for a knife to stab through the devil’s black heart.

Except that something about hurting this devil didn’t sit that well with me.

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Chapter Eighteen

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RAPHAEL

Change of plans.

This woman had too much fire to talk things through reasonably. So I'd scare her a bit and give her no alternative but to see things my way.

"Let's establish some rules, shall we?" I drawled in a lazy tone. She could lie to herself all she wanted, but the beautiful reporter was attracted to me. Her body's response to me confused her and she hated it.

I was careful not to let my cock brush against her backside or I risked losing my control. Just like the first night I had seen her, everything about her compelled me. Her scent reminded me of heaven and the devil was rarely given a glimpse of heaven. So I'd hold on to it this time.

There was no disappearing on me this time.

"Fuck you and your rules."

I shook my head amused. There'd be no reasoning with this woman. Not in her state. Her hate for me outweighed her smarts.

"Here's how this will go," I started, ignoring her outburst. "You'll come with us willingly, and I'll protect you and my brother."

"Not. Your. Brother." Her teeth clenched, her sapphires flashing with blue lightning. She was determined, I'd give

her that.

One only had to look at Gabriel and they'd know he was a Santos. He looked nothing like his biological mother nor his aunt.

I ignored her denial of blood relations like she hadn't spoken. "Or I'll have to manhandle you and you'll still come with me so I can protect my brother."

Her eyes narrowed to slits. "What about the option where you let us go?"

"There isn't one."

There was no place on Earth she and her son could hide from me. I'd hunt her and find her. Every goddamn time.

Couldn't the stubborn woman see it was for her own good?

She attempted to jerk against me again. Unsuccessfully. Except, her nice round ass ground against my groin and my cock instantly came to attention. Jesus. I had always had control over my impulses until this woman.

The moment I came into the room and scented her faint primrose perfume, my dick decided it was time to play. Fucking annoying as shit. It was the wrong time, the wrong place, and the wrong girl.

The Tijuana Cartel hitmen were on their way here now. We had to get a move on.

Just as the thought crossed my mind, Caine and Gabriel barged in.

"We have to move," Caine barked. "Two cars approaching. One mile away. Tijuana Cartel."

When we arrived, we just sat back and watched. Ensured it was safe. We spent the night taking turns keeping Gabriel and his aunt safe.

This morning, Nico sent the forewarning. Santiago Tijuana was on the move. So we came to grab them. We had an hour's heads up. Tops. We found Gabriel in the living room, playing a game on the iPad and greeting us

with a smile. He wasn't even scared to see us walk through the door.

Sailor should have at least taught him the stranger-danger rule.

"Mom, are you okay?" Gabriel watched us, trying to determine whether I was hurting his mother.

So I slowly turned her around and had her face me. Her eyes wide, ping-ponged between her son, me, and Caine.

"Sailor, they've found you already," I attempted one more time. I'd have to sedate her if she refused to cooperate. We were running out of time and options. Gabriel might have to witness it, which wasn't ideal. "I'm your best bet. I can keep you and Gabriel protected."

"You led them here," she accused.

"Nobody followed *us*," I snapped, keeping my voice somewhat measured. "Unlike you, my men and I know how to move in the shadows. You don't. They've had you all along. You're just lucky I was here first."

I could see her process the words, wheels spinning in that pretty head of hers, and I saw the decision in her eyes and the way she straightened her shoulders before she spoke.

"Okay, but if you try anything-" The meaning lingered in the air. Her threats meant nothing but I appreciated it nonetheless.

She'd do anything for her son, and I'd do anything to protect them both.

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Chapter Nineteen

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SAILOR

"You have my blood vow. My goal is to keep you and Gabriel safe."

I might be stupid but I believed him. Though it surprised me that he found me so fast. This was the one place that the Ashfords kept away from the public, and it was their escape place. Where no media or anyone could find them.

Only a select few knew about this place. Their closest friends. Of course, Aurora, Willow, and I spent many days during our school years here. My parents would drop me off and Byron, being the oldest, usually kept an eye on us *brats*. His favorite endearment for us.

Just as I nodded, the ground was rocked by a violent shudder and Gabriel ran to me, wrapping his arms around me.

"What's that?" His eyes, so much like Raphael's, widened, filling with fear.

"The enemy," Raphael answered. "It's time to move. Fast."

Without delay, I took Gabriel's hand, snatched his backpack off the floor, and followed Raphael out of the room and down the hallway. I might hate the guy but he *was* our better alternative right now. The Tijuana Cartel would kill us - no discussion.

“Hold on,” I stopped him, then glanced at Gabriel. “Stay right here, okay?”

He nodded and I rushed back to my bedroom where our runaway bags sat open. I quickly shoved a few things into it when I heard the sound of an engine in the distance. Zipping the bag shut and slipping my shoes on, I rushed back to the spot I left my son with his brother.

“I hear cars,” I whispered as Raphael grabbed the bag from me.

His eyes traveled to my bag and shook his head. “I already packed all yours and Gabriel’s clothing from your apartment.” My eyes widened. This guy was unreal. “Whatever you or he needs, we’ll purchase it when we get to my place.” While I tried to decide whether he was a *loco* mobster or just an extremely organized kidnapper, he turned his attention to Gabriel. “Hey buddy, we’re going to go through some rough terrain.” I groaned. *That’s not how you explain stuff to a seven-year old.* But I didn’t bother saying anything. We didn’t have time to waste. “I’m going to carry you. Okay?”

Gabriel’s eyes lit up. He loved to be carried. In one swift move, Raphael picked him up, his t-shirt tugging up and giving me a glimpse of his hard and tattooed abs. And holy mother of God! They were a masterpiece. And the way his jeans sat low on his hips.

Fuck!

It was so wrong to want to rip his pants off and trace my tongue over every inch of his tattooed skin.

“Ready?” Raphael asked. *Fuck, yeah!*

Then it dawned on me, he wasn’t talking about taking his pants off. He was talking about running. Gosh, what was happening to me? Have I gone all wild and horny overnight?

“Yeah,” I breathed. Nothing beats being turned on while a threat lurks at your door.

Raphael gave a terse nod at Caine and we were on the move. It was quiet as we moved through the woods. It was a false sense of security and I could see it in Raphael's tensed shoulders and the glance he'd share with Caine.

Both of them tucked the back of their shirts behind the gun, giving them free access to it and that alone sent sweat rolling down my back. Or it could be the hot temperatures. The humidity was intense.

We followed the dirty path through the woods, and I realized it'd take us to the main road.

"Why didn't you park in front of the cabin?" I whispered my question, scared that whoever was after us would hear us.

Raphael threw me a curious glance. "So we could sneak up on you." *Duh* was missing in that statement.

"Mom sleeps like she's dead," Gabriel explained in a low voice, the smile on his face wide. Thankfully, he didn't sense the danger we were in.

"Good to know, buddy," Raphael answered him and I rolled my eyes in response.

I couldn't shake off the feeling that something was off. It shouldn't have been so easy for anyone to find us, yet it took less than twenty-four hours. It was instinct, warning me to keep my guard up.

"How did you find me?" I asked.

Raphael's steps never slowed as he answered.

"We followed you from Gabriel's school. A friend of mine who has a tech company was able to pin your location and we followed you via satellite. Good thing too, since there was no record of this cabin even in his database."

I tripped over a log and would have fallen if not for Raphael's quick reflexes.

"What's the matter?" he demanded to know.

I met his eyes as thoughts sliced through my mind. Nobody knew I was coming. Not even my girlfriends. Nobody but Royce and I'd stake my life that he wouldn't

have told anyone. The Ashford brothers cared even more than I did about their privacy and location of this cabin.

“Nobody should have been able to find this place,” I rasped. “Are you sure you were not being followed?”

“Positive.”

Except, my parents knew about this place. I hadn’t told my mother where I was, but it’d be easy to guess. Maybe? Or maybe they traced my phone? I was on the phone only a few minutes, but it would be enough to lock on the location.

When I said nothing, we continued on, our footsteps soft against the forest ground. I followed them for the rest of the path without a word. Once at Raphael’s black Mercedes G-Benz, Raphael situated Gabriel in the back seat and glanced at me.

“Put your seatbelts on,” he ordered.

I nodded and immediately reached for the seatbelt and buckled Gabriel, then did the same with mine.

Getting behind the wheel, Raphael strapped himself in too, then muttered in Spanish to Caine, *“They are on our tail. Call for the plane and have them ready. It will be a bumpy ride.”*

His voice was tense. I pretended not to understand, although my heart thundered under my chest. If he was worried, it had to be bad. Raphael put the car in the drive just as his other guy sat on the motorcycle and revved the motor.

“Umm, is your guy really going to ride a motorcycle?” I asked, staring at Raphael’s man mounting a motorcycle.

“Yes.” He put his Mercedes into drive and without delay slammed his foot on the pedal.

I stiffened, my hands tightening in my lap and the motorcycle forgotten.

Raphael kept his foot glued to the floor, sending the speedometer flying. He kept glancing in the rearview mirror and I finally turned around to find three black Ford SUVs behind us, speeding just as fast.

“Is that them?” My voice shook and my eyes widened. Raphael might have showed up at the perfect time or Gabriel and I would have been dead.

“I think so, but I’m not sure.”

“What do you mean?” The words were barely out of my mouth when Raphael slammed hard on the breaks. I barely had time to brace my arms around Gabriel and lower his head onto my lap when one car rear ended us while the other two passed us.

“Fuck!” My ribcage burned from the seatbelt when the impact happened but I gritted my teeth and ignored the pain.

“Get down!” Raphael’s voice startled me. I leaned over Gabriel, my face down, just as a blast of gunfire shattered the back windshield.

Gabriel’s muffled scream mixed with Raphael’s string of curses.

“On your right, Caine,” Raphael barked.

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Chapter Twenty

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RAPHAEL

The fucking road was narrow, one way in and one way out. Yet the two motherfuckers crammed into the narrow road. If a car came from the opposite direction, it would be a head on collision and the seatbelts wouldn't save us.

Bullets flew around us and I drew my gun from the back of my pants. Caine started shooting the car that was inching towards us from the right. The bastards attempted to surround us.

Opening my window, I leaned over and shot two bullets into the tires of the SUV on my left side. Then I slammed on the brake as the driver lost control of his vehicle. Their car barely missed us and crashed into the one on the right while the one behind us slammed into the back of us again.

"Shit!"

Sailor lifted her head, terror in her blue eyes.

"It will be okay," I assured her, though I had no business giving her that assurance.

She nodded. My foot hit the gas pedal and we sped down the road.

"I can shoot," she said, surprising me.

Her voice shook but her hands didn't. With those three words, I made a quick decision. She unbuckled her seatbelt

as I pulled out a gun out of the glovebox, then handed it to her. She took it without hesitation and twisted around, peeking above the headrest.

Gabriel went to move but she stopped him. “Stay down, Gabriel,” she warned him. “No matter what, you keep your head down.”

“Okay, Mom.”

Fuck, this woman had guts. Raising her hand, she aimed, put her finger on the trigger and pulled.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

One hit, two misses. Not bad considering the speed we were going. I assisted with firing bullets of my own, sinking one into the driver’s side tire and sending him spinning uncontrollably.

“Good job,” I commended her.

She swallowed hard then handed me the gun. It was only now that her hand shook slightly and Caine took the gun from her.

She straightened up and Gabriel immediately lifted his head, his eyes wide and full of fear. Not exactly the best first day with my half-brother. I watched them both in the rearview mirror while speeding down the road, leaving the wreck we caused behind us.

“You good, Gabriel?” I asked him.

He nodded, then turned his eyes to his mother. “Mom, are we going to die?”

I watched in the mirror as Sailor took Gabriel’s face between her hands.

“No, we’re not going to die,” she said in her firm voice. “I won’t let that happen.” Her eyes flickered up and met mine in the mirror. I nodded, confirming her statement.

Gabriel followed her gaze. “Who are you? Are you mom’s friend?”

Smart little guy.

I’d let Sailor explain that one. I’d protect him with my life but I wouldn’t destroy everything that Sailor had told

him.

“He’s a friend-of-a-friend type of thing,” Sailor muttered, her cheeks flushing. “Umm, we ran into each other yesterday and now he’s helping me.” She stuck to a half-truth. “What do we do now?” Sailor asked me. “I can’t go back to my place. It’d put my friends in direct danger.”

“We need to get out of here,” I told her. “I’ll shoot a message to my friend to keep an eye on both of them.”

“Which friends?” I rasped. “Not the ones like-” *You*.

I shook my head. Didn’t she know her friend was already with someone like me?

“Alexei will keep Aurora safe,” I answered, keeping it general. There was no surprise on her face. Just a simple nod. “As for your other friend, I already have someone in mind.”

She sighed, then pushed her hand through her hair. “What a disaster,” she grumbled. “I ended up putting everyone in danger.”

It was her published article about the Tijuana Cartel insinuating bribes to prominent politicians and pictures of smuggling of women that put her on everyone’s radar. Or at least the Tijuana Cartel radar.

“It’s done now,” I told her with a growl. I was surprised she didn’t think of consequences before sending that article to print. She was smart; she knew it’d bring trouble to her door. She had a son to think about.

I dragged my phone from my pocket while speeding down the highway and towards the private airport.

“Raphael, twice in less than twenty-four hours,” Nico’s familiar voice greeted me.

“I need a ‘clean up’ service. I’ll send you the pinned location. Three vehicles, possible casualties.”

He chuckled. “It didn’t take you long,” he mused.

“The Tijuanas,” I grumbled. “I’d have expected them to clear out after yesterday’s disaster.”

“Hmmm,” Nico muttered pensively. “So would I. They are all about fleeing before they catch you. It seems odd they would risk being caught. I would have expected them to leave the country. Yet, they went after the girl.”

“Me too.” Something about what Sailor said bothered me. Nobody knew about the Ashfords’ cabin. Not even Nico’s app was able to see it on his surveillance. And Nico had the best resources. “Can you look into it?”

“You got it.”

The call ended and I pocketed my phone, then glanced behind me to see Sailor keeping Gabriel in her arms. Nobody could accuse her of being a bad mother. The kid clearly loved her.

My eyes traveled over her ridiculous tank top with ‘Bite Me’ written on her full breasts and shorts that had her long legs exposed. It was the kind of body that would have men drooling. Her ocean deep eyes and pouty lips probably had men falling all over themselves.

Yes, I was well on my way to being one of those men. But it was the look in her eyes that rattled something deep in my chest. *Vulnerability.* It made me want to protect her at all costs.

It was that shattered look that’d make me go savage for her.

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Chapter Twenty-One

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SAILOR

I boarded the luxury private jet with Gabriel's hand in mine.

We took the seat closest to the exit door. Just in case. Raphael threw himself in the plush leather recliner, pushing his hand through his thick, dark hair.

"Scotch," he said to the air attendant. "Two ice cubes. Sailor and Gabriel, anything to drink?"

Gabriel's eyes raised to mine. "Go ahead," I told him, knowing exactly what he wanted. Whenever we flew, it was his favorite thing to order.

"I'll have a Pepsi," he requested, grinning wide.

Thankfully, the ordeal of getting shot at didn't damage him. Maybe Gabriel had some mobster genes after all.

"And you, ma'am?" the attendant asked.

"Just water, please." With a terse nod, she turned around and went to fill our orders.

I turned to look out the cabin window, the last glimpses of land as we reached higher and higher into the air. Raphael's men moved toward the front of the plane, nodding at Raphael. Both of them moved like they were ready for combat. Not that I could blame them, not after what had happened to both of them.

“What are their names?” I asked Raphael. When the bullets were flying, I was preoccupied with staying alive, rather than paying attention to their names.

“Diego and Caine.”

The flight attendant arrived with our drinks and Gabriel squealed, jumping up from his seat to get his drink.

Raphael cocked his eyebrow. “Kid likes soda, huh?”

I shrugged. “It's a once in a while kind of thing.”

“Thank you, Maria.” He took a swig of his scotch, his eyes studying me. As if he was deciding what to do with me.

My nerves were shot. That many explosions and gunfire in two days would rattle anyone.

Gabriel turned his attention to the window. Silence crept through the cabin of the airplane, the only noise Gabriel’s occasional huffs and puffs.

“I have to go to the bathroom,” he finally announced.

Raphael pointed to the back of the plane, and I watched as my son scurried towards it. Once he was out of sight, I took the opportunity to grill Raphael.

“Where exactly are we going?”

“Somewhere safe.”

Totally not helpful.

“Could you elaborate?” I questioned, agitation lacing my voice. “Please,” I added through gritted teeth.

I guess manners never killed anyone.

I wanted to ensure my seven-year-old son didn’t end up in a war zone amongst criminals. He didn’t belong in the cartel that left a trail of destruction in their wake. All the criminals were similar in that regard. So were men like my father. I’d protect Gabriel at all costs. It was a promise I made. It was a debt I owed. Anya protected me all my childhood. I’d protect Gabriel for the duration of his life.

“I don’t want my son around men like you,” I added.

The devil in front of me went deadly still, and it was scarier than the attack that went on around us.

“He’s my brother and you kept him away from me,” he growled.

The infamous temper flared and my eyes narrowed to slits. The fucking balls on this man.

“Kept him from you?” I hissed, suddenly his mesmerizing features were non-relevant. “He’s not yours. He’s mine.” I leaned forward and my finger pushed against his hard chest. “*Mine*.”

Realizing what I was doing, my body jerked away from him, our eyes locked in a battle of wills. That full mouth curved into a harsh smile.

“He’s my brother. He's a Santos.”

“He’s a kid,” I spat out. “My kid! And I’ll be damned if I let you pull him into your shitshow.” I held his gaze, hoping he’d see in my eyes I meant those words. “Now tell me where we are going,” I demanded.

“I have an island,” he explained. “Right off the coast of Florida and only my most trusted men stay there with me.”

Island? Jesus, there’d be no leaving that unnoticed.

“So like a prison but without bars,” I snickered.

He smiled, unperturbed by my tone. “Like an island that is safe.”

“How did you find out about us anyhow?” I questioned him.

“I have my ways,” he drawled.

I stared at him. He was handsome, something wicked, dark and dangerous dancing in his eyes. I’d be an idiot not to recognize how competent he handled himself during the attack. Both times.

The question was whether he’d try to kill me in the end.

Gabriel came back from the bathroom and resumed sitting in his spot. His eyes flicked my way, then to Raphael and

back to me.

I smiled reassuringly. “You okay?”

He nodded. “Mom, are the bad guys going to come back?”

I pulled him into a hug, while meeting Raphael’s gaze over his head. I pondered what to say. Today was a shock to both of us. I didn’t want to lie to him and say we were safe, but I didn’t want to worry him either.

“If they do come back, I’ll be here to protect you,” Raphael assured. “Both you and your mother,” he added.

I watched in fascination as relief washed across my son’s face. *He trusts Raphael*, I realized. Whether it was misplaced or not remained to be seen.

“We won’t let anything happen to you, buddy,” I said, pressing a kiss on Gabriel’s forehead. “No matter what.”

Because I love you. Because I made a promise. Because your mother did the same for me.

My chest squeezed in that familiar way and something fierce burned in the back of my throat as it tightened. Emotions - love, fear, apprehension.

Relieved and assured, Gabriel dug out one of his comics and started reading, his eyes darting to the cabin window to look at the clouds every so often. When he had that dreamy look in his eyes, he reminded me so much of Anya. Sometimes, when we were still kids, she’d have that wistful look in her eyes. When she still hoped for a better life.

“Is something else the matter, Gabriel?” I asked him, worried I was doing something wrong. That he wasn’t happy.

“What about my school?” His brows furrowed. “I don’t want to be in trouble for missing school.”

A smile touched my lips. My little worrier. I ruffled his hair, brushing my hands over his soft dark curls. “I’ll talk to your teacher. Don’t worry about that.”

This time he grinned. “Thanks, Mom.”

I chuckled. “No problem, buddy. That’s what moms do. It’s our job.”

“You’re the best at it.”

Truthfully, half of the time I didn’t know what I was doing. But if he thought I was good at it, that was all that mattered.

Gabriel went to read his comics with a smile still on his face. And the whole time I could feel Raphael’s eyes on me. Burning me. Studying me.

I studiously ignored him, keeping my eyes on Gabriel. There was something about this man that rattled me on a fundamental level. It scared me more than his clear declaration of diablo tattooed on his hand, more than that ruthlessness he carried like a second skin, and more than the darkness that surrounded him.

I should detest him. I should hate him with every fiber of my being. Yet, I couldn’t deny he just saved Gabriel and me. He might be a vicious criminal, but he’d already proven to do more for my son than my parents ever had.

The thick silence grew deafening, a palpable tension filling the air. I could almost feel it touching my skin. Trust was a fragile thing and after my own parents betrayed a little girl’s trust, over and over again, I found myself doubting everyone.

I loved my friends, they had proven their loyalty and love over and over again. Yet, I could never muster strength to share the shameful secrets of our family.

Although they might have gotten an inclination that everything wasn’t rosy in our household that day at the hospital.

The last day I got to hug my sister.

My eyelids grew heavier, fatigue slowly settling in my bones.

My phone rang as Aurora, Willow, and I rushed through the bitter cold. We were late to our class. The wind howled, freezing the tips of my ears. I wasn’t fond of the cold,

despite people that thought my hair was appropriate for a winter setting.

I ignored it. I had my last final to take and then I'd answer all calls.

It rang again.

I stopped and dug through my cross shoulder book bag.

"Come on, Sailor," Willow complained. "We're going to be late and Professor Asshole will lock the door on us."

I glanced at the caller ID then raised my eyes. "You two go," I told Aurora and Willow. "I'll be right behind you."

"Are you sure?" Aurora asked. She hated leaving anyone behind. It was the result of what had happened with her brother.

"Yes," I assured her. "I'll be right behind you."

And still she didn't move. Not until Willow tugged on her arm and dragged her along.

I answered the phone. "Anya, is everything okay?"

"Sail, I think-" Panic in her voice shot an alarm through me. Did Father hurt her? "I think I'm in labor."

"What?" I rasped, confused. She wasn't supposed to have a baby for another month.

"I don't know," she cried. Anya never cried. Even when Father hurt her, she didn't cry. I hadn't even realized I was out of the building, my steps rushing across the parking lot of the campus.

"Where are you?" I asked her. "I'll come and get you."

"What about your exam?"

"Forget my exam," I uttered. "Where are you?"

"At- at work." I could hear pain in her voice. "The coffee shop. My boss won't like it if I leave."

"Fuck your boss," I spat out, my teeth chattering from the cold. "Have your stuff ready. I'm coming to get you."

The next few hours were a blur. I couldn't remember how I got to Anya nor how we made it to the hospital. The blood stain on her white maternity dress grew by the second. There was so much blood.

“Please Anya,” I whispered as I helped her out of the car. “Please don’t die.” She didn’t offer her usual assurance. “Lean on me,” I told her.

The scent of blood overwhelmed my senses. Each drum of the heartbeat buzzed in my ears. In rhythm with the fear that grew by the second.

“Help,” I yelled out, holding on to Anya’s form that slumped more and more with each step. She could barely walk. Her weight became mine and I tightened my hold. “I got you, Anya.”

“I’m going to die,” she whimpered.

“No, you’re not. You just lean on me.”

My eyes locked on her face and something deep in her dark eyes cut deep into my soul.

“You take care of the baby,” she croaked.

*I shook my head. Enough was enough. We had to run. “**We** will take care of the baby. Together.”*

Without warning, she folded over and before her knees hit the floor, I caught her. More blood pooling at our feet. The metallic scent seeped into my lungs.

“I peed myself,” Anya gritted.

My eyes lowered. A mixture of fluid and blood stained her legs. I didn’t think it was pee.

“I think your water broke,” I breathed.

Struggling to keep her up, I shot a look over my shoulder.

“Please, help,” I shouted.

Then the chaos erupted. Nurses ran over. Doctors shuffled around me. More nurses.

Beep, beep, beep.

“She’s not going to make it.” My eyes darted back and forth. Terror crawled up my spine and took a hold of my throat, suffocating me.

“We have to operate.”

More words. Darkness. I held Anya’s hand. Her eyes opened, a distant look in her eyes. I didn’t recognize it. It

held a hint of relief.

“Don’t leave me, Anya,” I choked out, my voice barely above a whisper.

“Keep the baby safe. Promise me.” She barely forced the words through her chapped, dry lips. The panicked look in her eyes shattered my heart.

I swallowed. “I promise,” I croaked.

“Be happy, Sail.”

The last words. And she was gone.

A strange silence followed as they wheeled her away from me. Time stilled. Darkness reigned. Loneliness followed.

I had no idea how long I stood there. Lost and alone. A feeling deep down warned me to prepare. I’d lose her. She needed rest.

Standing in the same spot, in the same room, I could still hear my sister’s words. Keep the baby safe.

“Miss McHale.” The voice was distant through the haze filling my brain. “Miss McHale.”

I blinked. A woman with red hair and kind eyes watched me. She was young. Older than me but too young to be a doctor.

“I’m Dr. Sophie.” My eyes lowered to the tiny baby in her arms. Black hair. Wrinkly face. I’d never seen a newborn before.

“Aren’t you too young to be a doctor?” It was an irrelevant question. My mind wasn’t ready to deal with reality.

“I just finished my residency.” Her voice was soft. A look of pity on her face. Sorrow.

My eyes locked on the baby wrapped in her arms. “Anya?”

“I’m so sorry,” she whispered.

“No.” My lips moved, but I didn’t hear my voice. My chest hurt so fucking much, I thought it’d collapse. This

couldn't be happening. Anya and I had plans. Just the two of us and her baby.

"Would you like to hold the baby?" she offered.

I swallowed hard. I needed air. I needed my sister back.

"I don't know how," I murmured.

Her eyes darted around us, then she pointed to the nearby couch. I followed her gaze. In a haze, I walked over to it and sat down.

"Okay, open your arms like you would if you'd carry a watermelon."

It was an odd instruction, but I followed it nonetheless. She put the tiny baby into my arms.

A soft cooing sound vibrated and my heart made an odd thump. "She's tiny," I rasped, emotions thick in my chest.

"It's a boy. A healthy baby boy."

My eyes studied the little face. "A healthy boy," I repeated softly. Dark hair. Tiny fingers. Tiny mouth. "Isn't he supposed to be bald?"

"Not always. He's beautiful."

I raised my head and our eyes met. Her fiery red hair and crystal blue eyes made her appear like a goddess come to set things right. Stupid notion. Nobody could set this right but me.

*"He **is** beautiful," I repeated. "Just like his mom."*

She nodded. "Just like his mom was."

***Was.** One word. It was all it took to make my heart bleed.*

I studied the tiny bundle in my arms. A little piece of Anya that God granted me. I couldn't tell if he looked like Anya. He looked like little Gabriel. It was the name she settled on. Gabriel for a boy and Gabriela for a girl.

"Stay here," she instructed. "If you need anything, press that button and I'll come."

I nodded, keeping my gaze locked on Gabriel. A soft click and she was gone. A soft whimper and I pressed him closer to my heart.

It wasn't until a drop landed on the small cheek that I realized I was crying.

"It will be okay, little Gabriel," I barely choked out. "I'll keep you safe. I promised your mom. Just you and me against the world, buddy."

Oh my God. I knew nothing about babies. Nothing. Anya didn't want to do Lamaze class. Almost as if she knew her end was coming.

I'd need diapers. And milk. Lots of milk.

The door opened and I lifted my head to find Aurora, Royce, Byron, and Willow at the door, along with Dr. Sophie. The latter didn't look too happy.

"We don't allow so many visitors at once."

"I don't have lots of milk," I muttered. Why did it hurt so much to talk? Even to breathe. It felt like there wasn't enough oxygen in the room. Tears ran down my face and over my lips, tasting salty on my tongue and dripping down my chin.

My eyes met Aurora's gaze then Willow's. "She's gone."

My best friends rushed over and each took a seat next to me, wrapping both Gabriel and me into their arms.

"I can't go back home," I rasped. "I- I promised."

A heavy weight crushed my lungs. Desperation laced my every word.

"Fuck," Byron and Royce said at the same time, then set things in motion. Royce strode over to the three of us. No! The four of us. With little Gabriel in my arms, there were four of us.

"Don't worry, blondie," Royce comforted, his big hand coming to rest gently on Gabriel's head. "Byron can move mountains. We got this. You don't have to go home."

"We can rent an apartment together," Aurora suggested. "We'll all help with the baby."

"Gabriel," I whispered. "Baby Gabriel."

"Like an angel," Willow murmured softly.

“Just like an angel,” I rasped. I’d keep my angel safe. His mother was my guardian angel, I’d be his.

The door swung open and the moment I saw two figures standing in the doorway, I shrank back, pulling Gabriel even closer to my chest. He never even stirred, unaware of the danger that lurked close.

Too close for comfort.

“What the fuck is going on here?” Father hissed. “Why aren’t you in school, Sailor?”

I shrank further back. Byron’s eyes darted to me then back to my father. I had never seen Aurora’s eldest brother in a cold, ruthless mode. Until now.

Royce put himself in front of his sister, Willow, Gabriel, and me. The room started to close in on me, the familiar fear creeping up my spine.

“Anya, your eldest daughter, passed away,” Byron informed him, as I peeked from behind Royce, holding my breath.

Father didn’t even flinch. Neither did my mother. She was always so adamant about pleasing him.

“She shouldn’t have had a baby.” Mother’s eyes shifted to me. No, not to me. To the baby in my arms and her lips turned into a distasteful grimace. “His coloring is a disgrace.”

I didn’t understand what she meant. He looked like a baby to me. Dr. Sophie even said he was a beautiful baby.

“I’m sorry,” Dr. Sophie cut in. “And who are you two?”

“We are her parents,” Father roared, his right hand with that fucking ring I hated so much lifting as if he was about to slap the beautiful doctor.

Byron stepped in front of her, his towering frame protecting her small frame. Not that she looked scared.

“Sailor’s coming home with us. You can take that baby and put it up for adoption. I don’t give a shit where it ends up.”

My spine straightened up. “No!” Everyone’s eyes, except for Byron’s, shifted to me. He kept his cold gaze locked on my father. “I’m keeping him. He’s mine.”

Byron muttered something that sounded like ‘Atta girl’ under his breath, while Dr. Sophie’s gaze held the same note of approval.

“There you have it,” she announced. “This is the maternity floor. So unless there is family to support, you can see yourself out.”

That woman was badass! I liked her.

“Fine.” Father’s face turned blood red, and I could see he barely held his anger back. “You are out then. No allowance. No clothes. No car. You’re on your own with that bastard in your arms.”

“We want nothing from you,” I hissed. Maybe it was the fact that Royce and Byron were here. Or maybe that my protective streak kicked in, but suddenly I found the courage to stand up to my parents. “And you call Gabriel bastard again, I’ll fucking kill you.”

Royce’s amusement was evident. The look he gave my father spoke of retribution if he uttered another word. I fucking loved Aurora’s brothers.

“Sailor, be reasonable,” my mother tried. “Come home with us. You are not in the position to take care of a baby. You are just finishing up your first year of college.”

Stubbornness and determination shot through me. “I’ll figure it out.” Somehow. “We are not your concern anymore.”

Father’s cruel eyes locked on me, then on Gabriel, and I watched his expression turn twisted and menacing.

“This isn’t over, Daughter. Not by a long shot.”

Retribution. It was his promise to me.

I held my breath as my parents turned their backs to me. It was both relief and fear for the future that remained.

I shot up with a jolt, my breathing labored and my heart thundering hard against my chest. My eyes roamed the

cabin only to find Gabriel fast asleep next to me and Raphael’s electrifying blue gaze that seemed to pierce my soul as he watched me.

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Chapter Twenty-Two

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RAPHAEL

I looked over to Sailor to see she'd fallen asleep. So did Gabriel.

She held him protectively even in her sleep. As if she anticipated someone would take him away from her at any moment. I wouldn't let that happen. It was clear Gabriel loved her and she loved him.

I let out a breath.

I had a plan. Tie Sailor to me. *Forever.* I had wanted her from the first moment I saw her eight years ago. And how appropriate that I found her again during Colombian Amor Y Amistad week, equivalent to Valentine's Day.

Her breaths were slow and even at first before turning harsher. Bad dreams. Or maybe memories. Those ghosts that lurked in her eyes but she'd gotten good at hiding. I wanted to chase them all away.

My gaze swept over her beautiful face. Those smooth porcelain cheekbones. Those long fair eyelashes. That pouty, sassy mouth. And that hair. Jesus that hair would bring a saint to his knees.

And I was no saint. Not even close.

My cell rang and I flicked a gaze to the caller ID.

Byron Ashford.

I couldn’t say I was surprised. I expected his call the moment I dragged Sailor and Gabriel out of the cabin. Frankly, I was surprised it took him this long.

“Byron,” I answered, leaning back into my seat while keeping my eyes on Gabriel and Sailor.

“What the fuck, Raphael?” The Ashford brother was pissed. “You took Sailor and Gabriel.”

“Yes.” No sense in denying it. It didn’t escape me that the Ashfords had top-notch surveillance in the cabin.

“One warning, Raphael,” Byron gritted. “Which is more than I’d do for anyone else. Bring them back, or I’m coming for you.”

Annoyance flared in my chest. Sailor and Gabriel were my concern, not his. My responsibility, not his.

“I’m not bringing them back,” I said, running my tongue across my teeth agitated. “Sailor agreed to come along. I’ll protect her and Gabriel from the Tijuana Cartel.”

“Well, thank you for the heads up about the cartel,” he retorted dryly. “They blew up my favorite cabin.”

“I was a bit too preoccupied getting Sailor and Gabriel out of there while getting shot at.”

A long pause. “What is your interest in them anyhow, Raphael?”

“He’s my half-brother.” *And she’ll be my wife*. Although I kept that thought to myself.

“Get the fuck out.” Shock colored Byron’s voice. “How is that even possible?”

“You really want me to explain to you how babies are made?” I questioned sardonically.

“Fucker,” he muttered. “Does Sailor know?”

Interesting. She definitely knew, but the question was why she kept that from the Ashfords. Or at least this Ashford.

“You’ll have to ask her,” I told him. “What shape is your cabin in?”

“It’s fucking leveled to the ground. You must have led them there,” Byron said, his annoyance evident even over the phone.

“I wasn’t followed,” I said dryly.

“Are you sure?” He was baiting me.

“Yes, I’m fucking sure,” I answered, not taking his bait. “Maybe you need to upgrade your system.”

He snickered. The fucker knew he had one of the best systems in the world. He even rivaled that of Nico’s.

“Fat chance, unless-” He paused and I waited for him to finish his thought.

When he didn’t, I prompted, “Unless?”

For a moment, I thought he wouldn’t answer.

“Unless her parents let the location leak,” he hissed.

Sailor’s question flickered in my mind. She assumed I was followed too. I wondered if she came to the same conclusion as Byron. That her parents might have led the Tijuana to them. But that would mean the old McHale worked with Santiago Tijuana.

“I want to talk to Sailor,” Byron demanded. I normally liked him but his request annoyed the fuck out of me. “I want to hear from her that she and Gabriel are okay.”

“She’s sleeping,” I grumbled, jealousy gnawing at me. It was clear Byron had a close relationship with them. “Both she and Gabriel are. They had a rough morning.”

Silence followed. “She’s sleeping in front of you?”

He seemed surprised and hesitant to believe me. “I’m not in the habit of lying about shit like that.”

“Sailor *never* sleeps in front of strangers.” His statement hit me right in the chest. Maybe she remembered me after all. “Are you sure?”

“Would you like me to snap a photo and send it to you?” I spat back sarcastically.

A long pause.

“No need for a photo. But Raphael?”

“What?”

“Keep them safe,” he grunted. Byron’s voice held the slightest clench of his teeth. “I took responsibility for both of them that day in the hospital when the old McHale disinherited her for choosing the boy over him. And don’t trust her parents.”

Another few words were exchanged. I hung up and tossed the phone on the table next to me and my eyes returned to the young woman that I had never forgotten. With that hair of freshly fallen snow.

The moment I saw her, the world started turning for me. The moment my hands touched her body during our dance, my heart started beating.

I just couldn’t overlook that. I couldn’t let her go. I’d marry her and keep her safe with me.

Sailor jolted up, her dream-full eyes darting left and right. Still confusing reality and dreams. I watched her chest rise and fall, ghosts lurking in those eyes that reminded me of clear blue skies.

If there was heaven, it was in her eyes.

She flicked a gaze at Gabriel who still slept next to her, his head on her chest. I watched as her hand brushed the strands off of his forehead, a slight tremor to her fingers. It made me even more curious about this young woman. Peel all her layers and get to the bottom of her essence.

She was strong and fragile. Vulnerable and resilient.

So unlike my own mother, or any other woman I had ever met.

“We need to talk,” I said.

She released a shaky breath then rolled her eyes. “We *are* talking.”

The woman could be annoying. It would be easier if she’d just listen and agree. But this woman seemed to be overly opinionated.

“What made you publish that article?” I asked her.

Anger flashed in her eyes. “How about the fact that women were being smuggled? Tortured. Raped.”

She shot me a glare, as if she held me personally responsible for it.

“It’s despicable, I agree.” Her eyes narrowed into slits. “But it would have been easier to let others handle it.”

“Well, they weren’t handling it,” she spat out. “The police gave me some shitty excuse of probable cause.”

“So you were planning to bring the whole cartel down on your own,” I mused.

“If I had to,” she hissed.

“So why is a woman from your upbringing even interested in things like that?” She stiffened, her complexion paling slightly. “Pampered princesses usually don’t care for the trouble of others.

“My upbringing? Pampered princess?” *Madre de Dios.* This woman got pissed off by anything I said. “Why don’t you worry about your questionable upbringing? You’re the criminal, not me. Pampered criminal.”

“And you’re the one trying to get yourself and my half-brother killed.”

“You… you son of a-”

“Careful, Sailor,” I warned her in a low tone. “Careful how you finish that sentence.” A flicker of fear entered her eyes. I regretted seeing it there, but she better learn now how far she could go. “Don’t speak ill of my mother.” Or else hung in the air.

“How lovely,” she muttered, a false bravado in her voice. She was scared, there was no mistaking it. “A criminal with a soft side.”

“You better learn to appreciate it,” I told her, leaning back into my seat and downing the rest of my scotch. “Because we are to be married.”

She blinked. Then blinked again.

Uncertainty entered her eyes and her lips curved into a grimace or half-smile, as if she tried to decide whether I was joking or not.

“Yeah, in your dreams buddy.”

I signaled the flight attendant for another drink. Fuck, I'd need the entire bottle to deal with this frustrating woman.

Once my refill arrived and the attendant disappeared back in the cockpit of the plane, I returned my attention to Sailor who looked like a deer caught in my headlights.

"You *will* marry me," I told her firmly. "If you want to live."

"Listen, *Raphael*," she started, her lips curving with disgust when she uttered my name. "First, the worst damn proposal. Ever! Secondly, you're not my type. And lastly, I-I-." Her words faltered. For some reason, she didn't want to give me the third reason. "Well, two reasons are quite enough."

"Now you listen to me, *Reina de nieve*." Snow queen. It suited her. With that silvery blonde hair and blue eyes that could ice over when she was pissed off. Except, I was certain there was nothing icy in this woman, but I loved getting her riled up. "I don't care if you live or die." *Lie*. I so fucking cared. "But I care what happens to Gabriel. And our marriage will show friend and foe that you two are under my protection."

"Call me ice queen again and I'll ice your fucking balls," she threatened. I didn't bother correcting her on the meaning of *nieve*. "Or cut them off." We locked gazes, the battle of wills like a hurricane through the air. "Can't you send out a memo?"

"No." *Really, a memo!*

"I'm not marrying you," she protested. "I can figure something out."

"Are you willing to risk your son's life on '*figuring something out*'?" I was pushing her hard. I was fixated on Sailor and I didn't give a shit how I got her, as long as I got her. Yes, her safety and Gabriel's was a priority, but I refused to give her up. I'd make her *mine*.

I couldn't stomach letting her go.

“But marriage?” she grumbled. “That’s a huge step.”

“Well, you were eventually going to get married.” She rolled her eyes. “I might not be Aaron Kennedy but unlike him, I can keep you and Gabriel safe.”

A small gasp escaped her. She opened her mouth, then closed it, her lips thinning in displeasure.

“You are definitely not Aaron,” she snickered.

I chuckled. “You’re right. I’m not.” A satisfied gleam entered her eyes, but my next words squashed it. “I prefer women and *only* women in my bed. Unlike the pompous prick that hides behind you.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, that your on-again, off-again boyfriend shouldn’t be a fucking coward and hide behind you to keep his image up. If he prefers men, he should man up and say so.”

“Holy fuck,” she muttered appalled. Okay, it would seem Sailor was unaware of her boyfriend’s preferences. “Aaron is bi?”

“You never knew?” I questioned her, surprised.

She shook her head. “Hell no. I just thought he-” She pushed her hand through that platinum mane of hers. “I don’t know what I thought. It just kind of worked for me because it was merely platonic.”

Fuck, my day was looking up. I didn’t know why it thrilled me to hear there was nothing between her and the pompous prick.

“Anyhow, all of that's beside the point. I won’t marry you.”

I leaned forward, resting my elbows on my knees. “You will, Sailor. And you’ll thank me on your knees.” Her cheeks stained red at the insinuation. Truthfully, it wasn’t how I meant it, but I liked the way her mind worked. “You’ll do it for Gabriel. To keep him safe.”

She caught her bottom lip between her teeth, contemplating her options. There were none. But for some

reason, I loved tormenting her, letting her believe she had a way out. When she didn't.

"If I marry you," she started, "I can leave whenever I want?"

No. "Sure."

"Will it be safe for Gabriel and me to leave?"

I reached out and took her chin between my fingers. I couldn't resist running a thumb over her bottom lip. I watched her delicate neck bob as she swallowed. Her skin was so damn fair that my fingers already left imprints on her delicate skin.

"It will always be safe for Gabriel and you."

But not to leave. Never to leave.

Because my web had been weaved and I finally found you.

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Chapter Twenty-Three

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SAILOR

We landed on a small landing strip a little after lunchtime.

The moment we stepped off the plane, I took in the idyllic island. Crystal blue waters surrounded the land, and I heard Gabriel gasp next to me.

“You like it?” I asked him, smiling. It was clear that he did. His eyes shifted left, then right, then left again. Curiosity and excitement shone in them.

As soon as my shoes hit the ground, Raphael urged me forward where a black Jeep Sahara waited for us. The top was down, doors were off and Gabriel squealed in delight, running towards it.

“I want one when I grow up, Mom,” he announced as he hopped in the back seat.

“I’ll make sure you have one,” Raphael answered. I glared at him, annoyed that he’d answer on my behalf.

“I didn’t know your name was Mom,” I muttered sarcastically under my breath. Gabriel didn’t hear me but Raphael did. I shot him a side-glance. “Collecting some brownie points?”

He slid into the Jeep and put it into drive. “I need some brownie points with Gabriel’s mom. Any suggestions?”

I rolled my eyes. “Mom loves dogs, ice cream, and the beach,” Gabriel chimed in, grinning happily. “And drinking wine with Aunt Aurora and Aunt Willow.”

“Gabriel!” I scolded softly. “You're supposed to keep my secrets.”

He gave me a feigned, innocent look but his mischievous smile ruined it. “Those things make you happy. I like when you’re happy.”

Be happy, Sail. The breeze whispered my sister’s last spoken words. Those words changed the course of my life. I have breathed them. Soaked them in, just like a wilting flower soaked in the water.

We passed a set of marble stone gates, then pulled up to the house. My eyes traveled over the marble mansion. It was so bright that it made me squint my eyes.

“Welcome to heaven,” I snickered softly. “Tell me your sins and you shall pass. Nah, just joking. Hell is just as bright.”

Oh, crap. I said that out loud.

“So poetic,” Raphael snorted.

“Mom is good at rhyming,” Gabriel commented, already getting out of the car. “Aunt Aurora said she’d sometimes enter poetry competitions at school.”

I waved my hand as I got out of the Jeep at the same time as Raphael. “That was a long time ago.”

Coming around the Jeep and planting his hand at the base of my spine, he guided me up the large, stone steps and through the large door. We made our way through the spacious marble lobby with a circular marble stairway leading to the first floor and the second.

My eyes flickered above my head to find a large dome above us with a painting of the archangels. The four angels - Raphael, Gabriel, Michael, and Uriel.

I lowered my gaze to find Gabriel’s awed expression and his mouth slightly agape as he stared at the ceiling. “I never want to leave,” he declared.

“That makes me happy, buddy,” Raphael said amused. “I want you and your mom to be happy here.”

It didn’t escape me he was doing his best to make Gabriel love this place. Not that he had to work hard at it. This place was like a paradise on Earth, and every window you gazed through provided glimpses of crystal blue water stretching for miles across the horizon.

“Want me to show you around?” he offered.

Gabriel and I shared a glance then nodded. We continued our walk through the lobby and out the back door where the green garden oasis greeted us with a charming little stone path weaving the way towards what looked to be a white sandy beach.

Even from here, I could hear the waves crashing against the shore.

Without any warning, Gabriel sprinted past us.

We followed the sound of his happy laugh down the little romantic path, shaded by palm trees all the way down to the beach.

And all the while I heard my sister’s voice. *Be happy, Sail.*

A soft breeze and the sound of waves woke me and I shot up. It was the middle of the night and I laid in a large, four-poster bed, carved from mahogany wood. The little nightlight threw a soft glow through the room and I found comfort in it.

A deep breath in. A soft exhale.

The humidity in the air was thick with the salt air that fragranced it. A white mosquito net surrounded me and my eyes shifted to the open window to find the moon reflected over the dark surface of the sea.

Then the events of today, or was it yesterday, came rushing back. Waking up to Raphael Santos in the Ashfords' cabin, barely escaping the attack, and taking the private jet to an island.

And his insistence that I marry him.

I told him I'd think about it. He made it clear there would be nothing to think about. Nonetheless, I wouldn't allow that man to boss me around.

The reasonable part of me knew he saved Gabriel's life. And mine. But another part of me realized there was no way off the island. It was protection but also sort of an imprisonment. Although, I was also relieved to find, that he didn't take me to Miami, the place that Aurora, Willow, and I had seen his father torture Anya.

The nightmare that had plagued us for the past seven and a half years.

It'd make do for now though. Until I could come up with a better plan.

Shifting off the bed, I padded over the Spanish tile floor to the large open window that led to the balcony. The view was magnificent during the day. Even at night, slivers of moonlight danced over the dark surface.

Moving away from the balcony, I headed out of the room and to Gabriel's bedroom. It was right next to mine. I found him in a deep sleep, his usual position of his leg hanging over the bed and his dark curls covering part of his face.

I neared the bed and brushed the curls away from his face. He looked like a dark angel like this, his facial expression relaxed. It gutted me to see the fear on his face when we were being shot at.

Even scarier was the thought that lingered in my mind. That my parents were connected to yesterday's attack. I didn't tell my mother I was at the cabin but maybe she guessed. Or maybe my stupid comment that I was at the Ashford's place tipped her off.

If only the Ashfords never trusted them. But my parents were those rare people that knew the location of the cabin. After all, the McHale family was one of the most influential D.C. political families. Who would ever doubt them?

It wasn't until Anya had a baby then died, and I walked away from them that the whispers started. That the McHale family wasn't so perfect after all. They had no idea how right they were. Our family was fucked up.

Either way, I was done. I wanted nothing to do with them. I wished they'd rot in hell. They said karma was a bitch. Well, I still waited for it to start playing with the two people that destroyed my sister.

I closed my eyes and inhaled another deep breath. Anya loved the mountains and the views. She found peace in her final resting place - on top of the Appalachian mountain. Courtesy of Royce Ashford.

The snow covered every visible inch of land as Anya's coffin was lowered down into the darkness of the earth. I couldn't help but think she'd like the setting. Leaving the fresh snow white view to embrace her darkness.

She didn't mind it; I feared it.

A soft tremor rolled down my spine, and it had nothing to do with the zero temperatures. I could barely keep my shit together. I cried a lot over the last few days. I barely slept - until Royce figured out I was scared of the dark.

So he installed a nightlight in my room and Gabriel's. Byron handled all the legalities with his lawyers with Winston's help. Those two could rule the world together.

My eyes roamed over the small group. The three Ashford brothers, Willow and Aurora, and little Gabriel. And Anya resting in the beautiful white casket.

All the people that mattered.

Little Gabriel slept in my arms.

Everywhere I looked on top of this mountain, the scene was serene. Peaceful. But inside my soul, a storm was brewing. Ugly and green. Hateful and red. I wanted to

make my parents pay. I wanted to make them suffer, like they made Anya suffer.

It was an ugly feeling, yet I refused to let it go and let it fester inside me. I didn't know how or when, but I'd make them pay.

"Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust. In sure and certain hope of the resurrection—"

I stopped listening. My mind drifted. My soul hurt.

Each member of my new little family came up and hugged me with little Gabriel still sleeping soundly in my arms. I couldn't bear to leave. I needed one more minute to say goodbye.

"Remember, blondie," Royce whispered softly into my ear as he wrapped his big arms around me. "You grieve today. Get even tomorrow."

I met Royce's dark gaze. He and Aurora looked most alike. Dark hair and dark eyes.

The burn in my throat choked and my chest squeezed. "I can't let her go," I rasped.

"And you won't," Royce assured. His eyes flickered to the little baby in my arms. "She's part of Gabriel. She'll always be part of you."

The tears on my face half-froze as they ran down my face. I tasted salt on my tongue.

I followed his gaze to the snow suit-bundled baby in my arms, his eyes closed as he slept comfortably. Hints of his dark hair were visible even under all of the layers of clothes. He was beautiful.

"Want me to stay with you?" Royce offered. I shook my head. His home was about two miles away from here and we all drove here in two vehicles. But right now, I needed some time alone. "I'll wait for you in the car."

"Thank you."

With each step he took, the crunching of the snow under his boots grew fainter and fainter.

My gaze locked on the coffin. The men were waiting for me to leave so they could close the grave.

Fuck, it hurt so fucking bad to let her go. I couldn't muster the will to move. An elaborate arrangement full of red primroses rested on top of the white casket. It fit the scenario. Blood stained Anya's innocence. ***He*** *stained her innocence.*

My heart bled, each shuddering breath I took like shredded glass cutting me on the inside. The wind picked up, the soft howl of it swirled the snow around us. A storm was coming. It was time to go even if I didn't want to.

"I'm going to make him pay, Anya," I whispered into the wind, my eyes locked on her resting place. "And I'll keep Gabriel safe."

A howl of wind was my answer.

And I swore I could hear her soft voice in it. "Be happy, Sail."

A shudder rolled down my spine with those memories. I hadn't been to the grave in the last six months. It had been the longest I'd gone without visiting her.

Our parents hated Gabriel. That much I knew. But would they go as far as hurting him?

They hurt Anya, my mind whispered. If they hurt Anya, they'd hurt Gabriel. God, our family was so broken for as long as I could remember. She protected me, but nobody protected her.

Glancing around, I regretted not seeing a couch or a chair. Anything, so I could sleep in the same room as my son. As if I sensed something was about to happen. To him. To me. *To us.*

With a sigh, I headed out of Gabriel's room, leaving his door wide open so I could hear him if he called out to me. Not that he ever did. It was more for my benefit than his.

Just as I turned the corner from Gabriel's room, I collided with a hard, warm chest. I braced my hand on a set

of muscled abs to steady myself. A breath hitched in my throat realizing who I had run into. *Raphael.*

My palm stilled, resting on his white t-shirt and heat burned through it and straight to my core. Like a kindled flame it flickered and spread through my bloodstream. The house was so quiet, I heard my own heartbeat and the warning screamed. Yet, I remained glued to my spot.

I took a step back and raised my eyes to meet his towering frame. He regarded me with that hooded blue gaze, his presence taking all the air and space in the hallway.

He had a phone in one hand at his side, watching me with curiosity.

“Can’t sleep?” he finally asked. I shook my head. “You’re safe here,” he assured, yet it did nothing to make me feel better.

“Thanks,” I muttered.

A long pause followed. “About your suggestion-” I started hesitantly. “If we went through with it, what is your plan? What will happen to Gabriel and me after you end the Tijuana Cartel?”

I worried about our safety. The island was supposed to be safe but so was the Ashford’s cabin. Yet we were found.

“Is Gabriel sound asleep?” he asked instead, evading my question. It wouldn’t do me any good to pressure him. Not on my first night here, but I’d have to get at least some answers.

“Yes.”

“Good,” he drawled. His eyes fell to my cheeks, the darkness dancing in his gaze. Full of promises. Consuming. Lustful.

“You didn’t answer my question,” I pointed out.

“You and Gabriel will always be safe with me,” he declared. “I have many enemies roaming this world.

“You should go to sleep too. Unless you’re looking for some fun.”

The criminal. The devil with wicked gleam dancing in his eyes. The way he watched me promised a way to forget all the hurts. At least for a little bit.

It was tempting. Oh so tempting to give in to the ache that throbbed between my legs.

Instead, I bolted away from him and towards my room like the devil was at my heel. His soft chuckle followed me all the way to my bedroom.

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Chapter Twenty-Four

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RAPHAEL

Shutting the door to my bedroom, which was in the opposite wing of the manor, I found myself back at my desk and powered up my computer. The file Nico sent was thick and up until now, I only focused on information about Sailor.

My chest grew full each time I thought about Sailor and Gabriel. It took no time for me to fall under their spell. The kid wore his heart on his sleeve. In our world, it wasn't a good quality, but I didn't fucking care. I'd help Sailor preserve that innocence for as long as I could. There was plenty of time to be a bastard.

Just like Sailor, I felt the need to check on Gabriel tonight. My innocent and kind-hearted half-brother, unlike the one I grew up with. Vincent was a sadistic and cruel bastard. Gabriel wasn't jaded by this world around us. And me, I wasn't exactly innocent but I'd like to think I wasn't as sadistic as Vincent who liked to torture the helpless and innocent.

After all, I had Diablo tattooed on my hand. I was six when I made my first kill. I caught one of my father's men raping our maid and I lost my shit. I snatched a butcher knife from the nearby table and stabbed him in the neck. After that, it was a blur. When I finally got off of him, my

skin was soaked with his blood and he had sixty-six wounds. A six-year-old boy and sixty-six wounds. People saw six-six-six and I was pronounced diablo.

From the moment Vincent was pronounced dead, I became the visible son. The only living son. And I fucking hated it. Until that moment, I had my own agenda and businesses I'd kicked off. I knew my responsibilities to the family, but being the second son left me the freedom to do what I wanted outside the family business. I disagreed with Vincent's and our father's methods. Human trafficking. Forced prostitution. Selling of women.

I fucking hated it all.

But changes were impossible because for as long as my father lived, he ruled the Santos Cartel. Imagine the surprise when Sasha Nikolaev, that fucking idiotic and impulsive bastard, executed my father. The world suddenly turned their attention to me. A new head to the Santos Cartel. A colder one. A focused one. A more lethal one. But not more cruel.

The day I buried my father at St. Peter and Paul Catholic Church, rows and rows of upstanding citizens came to see him off. Not because he was a good man, but because he was part of the Florida underground and ruled the crime of the entire state. They wanted to ensure they still had a spot at my table, their hands already eager for more bribes.

The procession of stretch limos, paparazzi, and reporters lingered all around, catching glimpses of visiting criminals.

If only all these upstanding citizens knew how much drama happened in their own worlds.

Just look at D.C. and the McHale family. That city might as well be called Sin City instead of Vegas. It hid filth and secrets under the illusion of justice and long lines of prominent political figures.

My eyes roamed over the screen. Pages and pages of information, and it finally made sense how Anya and my

father came to be.

The old McHale owed Benito King a favor and had signed The Belles and Mobster's agreement with Cassio's father. Nico's wife shot Benito, but unfortunately decades of shit takes a long time to clean up. Anya was one of those victims of Benito's infamous Belles and Mobster's agreement. My father bought the contract from Benito when my old man decided he'd fuck everything under the sun so he could produce another son. My father called up to collect the debt and the old McHale offered up Anya like a sacrificial lamb. Although, McHale technically had violated that contract - because he didn't give him his biological daughter.

And then there was the information on Anya's paternity. *Interesting.* It explained Sailor's statement the night we met. Her father hated all things Hispanic. I'd bet my fortune this was the reason why.

I wondered if Sailor knew, and how much exactly. She hated me enough. Maybe she thought I was just like my father. It was hard to tell when she kept herself so fucking closed off.

Sailor's parents were no better than my father, except that Sailor didn't have the Nikolaevs with sights set on her family. I suspected the Nikolaev brothers never realized they actually did me a favor, even if I had to seek revenge for it. Suddenly, as the head of the cartel, I was able to implement changes and new rules. I put an end to the human trafficking and all our business with the Tijuana Cartel who were the primary suppliers of human flesh.

That went over well. Or not. And our feud began.

How fucking ironic that that same enemy now had their sights on my half-brother and his mother. Except, they didn't know of Gabriel's connection to me.

But Sailor's parents did.

I read through Nico's email again. It was the last contract that had me fucking reeling with anger. It burned

so strong, I had to choke it down. It burned in my throat, in my chest, and marred my vision with red.

Just like the day I killed my first man.

My eyes skimmed up through the pages and my jaw tightened as the need to hunt down Sailor’s parents and shoot them in the goddamn head crawled through my veins.

I couldn’t fucking believe it. I’d expected anything from uptight, backstabbing prominent figures but never something like this. I glanced at the date of the contract. It was signed a week ago. Her father sold Sailor to Santiago Tijuana. The old fucker was Santiago’s connection in D.C. and it was only thanks to Sailor’s old man that the Tijuana Cartel poached the area and posted bail.

It was time to tear into the Sailor's family.

Nobody gets away with hurting my little brother. Or my woman.

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Chapter Twenty-Five

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SAILOR

I tossed and turned for the rest of the night. Worry swarmed my mind.

To marry or not to marry. To trust or not to trust.

Gabriel needed protection. From my parents. From the Tijuana Cartel. Probably many others if his connection to the Santos family came out. All of it kept me tossing and turning for most of the night. The first flickers of dawn came over the horizon and I gave up on sleep.

Pulling out my cell phone, I turned it on and checked my messages. I had tons of missed messages and calls from Aurora and Willow.

Aurora: *Where are you?*

Willow: *Why is that freaking scary dude from New Orleans stalking me?*

Aurora: *Who? Alexei? He's with me.*

Willow: *His scary-ass brother.*

Aurora: *Sasha?*

Willow: *I didn't ask him his name. He's lurking, scaring my dates away.*

Aurora: *Sailor, where are you?*

Willow: *Answer, woman. All your and Gabriel's clothes are gone. I'm freaking out.*

Aurora: *Sailor, I'm going to send Alexei after you if you don't answer.*

Good God. Anyone but that scary man. I didn't like to judge people by their appearances but Jesus Christ, he was fucking scary. I still struggled thinking of him and Aurora together. They were the polar opposites.

I checked the time of the last message. Something told me that if I hid in fucking Siberia, that man would find me. Aurora's message was stamped an hour ago, so I quickly typed up my answer. ***I'm good. Both Gabriel and I are safe. I'll be in touch. Don't worry.***

Afterwards, I took a quick shower and got dressed, but before heading downstairs, I checked on my son. He was twisted on the bed, his foot hanging off the bed again, right off the pillow and his covers half off the bed. My lips curved into a smile seeing him so sound asleep, his mouth slightly parted. At least yesterday's events left him unscathed.

It was quiet as I made my way through the house, most of the household still sleeping. When we landed yesterday, I saw guards roaming around the house and the island. Raphael mentioned yesterday that he had guards and household staff staying on the island, but he never mentioned how many people actually lived here. Though from my observation, he had a small military operation going on here.

The rising sun cast shadows across the hallway. The home was magnificent. It was luxurious but also welcoming. Unlike my parents' home. I learned early on not to touch anything in our home. I accidentally broke my father's ashtray once. He hit me so hard I flew across his study, the back of my head banging the wall. Anya came to my rescue that day, as she did so many other times. She told him she broke it. He knew full well that I did. After all, he saw me do it.

But he grinned, that awful evil grin, and then he sent her to her room. That night, Anya forbade me from coming

to her room.

Shaking my head and the past along with it, I turned the corner and found myself in a huge kitchen. The stove and the oven were already going, the scent of fresh bread making my mouth water. I approached the stove and lifted the lid, finding something resembling chicken. At least I thought it looked like chicken, although it seemed odd to be cooking chicken in the morning.

Putting the lid back on, I peeked into the oven. It looked like bread but it smelled sweet, almost like melted chocolate.

“It's a chocolate con pan.” Raphael’s deep voice came from behind me, and I shivered from the sound filling the silent kitchen.

I slowly straightened to my full height and turned around to meet his gaze. Raphael in jeans and a t-shirt was a sight to behold. My heart raced a mile a minute and my breathing shallowed as his gaze fell down my body.

Something about the way he watched me lit a match and caused sparks through my bloodstream that threatened to turn into full blown fireworks.

I stood there in a pair of white shorts and a blue crew neck top, barefoot against the cool tile while my skin buzzed with warmth. Black ink covered his arms, smooth tanned muscle giving me glimpses that had my imagination running a mile a minute. I wondered how much of his tanned body was actually covered in ink. The curious part of me wanted to examine every inch of him.

Warmth rushed to the pit of my stomach and spread through me like fire.

“Are you just going to stare or are you going to say something?”

I blinked at his tone.

“Is this how you treat all your guests?” I retorted back, my voice breathless.

He gave his head a shake, letting out a small breath of amusement. “Only the ones that can’t say good morning.”

I narrowed my eyes on him. It wasn’t my fault his body was so gorgeous it rendered me speechless.

“Good morning,” I grumbled. “Happy?”

“Yes.”

Sidestepping me, he turned off the oven, grabbed a mitten and pulled out a pan full of delicious smelling bread.

“You don’t strike me as the kitchen type,” I mused out loud. “Did you wake up hours ago to slave over the stove?”

Another breath of amusement left him and his gaze sparked. “No, Beatrice did. My cook.”

As if on cue, a woman with midnight dark hair sauntered into the kitchen and my jaw just about dropped. That couldn’t be the cook. This had to be a model or some hotness Raphael was dating.

“Ah, there she is.” Raphael threw a fleeting glance the woman’s way before returning his eyes to me. “Good morning, Beatrice.”

“Good morning, Señor.” Her dark eyes watched me curiously. “Señora.”

“Breakfast smells delicious,” I praised. My eyes shifted between Raphael and her, wondering if the two had something going on. I couldn’t imagine anyone being able to resist her. She was gorgeous.

I watched as Beatrice moved around the kitchen, confidently. Like she owned the place. And all the while, Raphael’s eyes remained on me while he leaned against the doorframe.

Beatrice set the table and set out a plate full of pastries and something that looked like tacos.

“Umm, can I help you with anything?” I offered. She was in the midst of wiping down the kitchen surfaces.

She waved her hand. “Please sit.”

My eyes flickered to Raphael, unsure if I was supposed to sit here or somewhere else to eat.

“I’ll join you.” Raphael took three steps and found himself at the table, then pulled out a chair for me.

Once seated, Beatrice put a cup of coffee in front of Raphael and in front of me. “With French vanilla, just the way you like it,” she commented, her smile genuine.

I blinked confused. “How did you know?”

Her face paled a bit and she threw a worried gaze Raphael’s way.

“It’s okay, Beatrice,” he assured her, then his eyes locked on me. “I have given everyone on the island information about you and Gabriel on an as needed basis. Beatrice knows the foods and drinks you like so she can prepare meals you will enjoy.”

“Oh.” Slightly overboard, but thoughtful. *I think. “*And how do you know what we like or don’t like?”

“Our mutual friend,” he remarked mysteriously.

I cocked my eyebrow. “Nico Morrelli?” I asked hesitantly. Not that I thought of him as a friend. More like an acquaintance.

He nodded. “He has a way of digging up information on people. Detailed reports are his specialty.”

“That’s some detailed report,” I grumbled.

“You have no idea.”

Deciding not to comment on it, I dug into the pastry and glanced at the clock as I chewed. Gabriel liked to sleep in, so it’d be another few hours before we saw his face. It might give me some time to get some work done. I had three articles to edit before they were due to print. One of them focused on the South American Cartels, including the one belonging to Raphael Santos.

Another reason why marrying Raphael was a bad idea. However, I’d come to the conclusion he might be my best avenue. He’d protect Gabriel. Except that I had a hard time saying that final ‘yes’ out loud.

For a while, I kept my eyes on my plate as I ate, Raphael seated directly across me.

“How long are they staying here?” Beatrice suddenly asked, switching to Spanish. I didn’t move a muscle, determined not to let on I could understand her. I took French and Greek in school, but since Gabriel had Spanish since Kindergarten, I studied it with him. He was a natural, I tried hard to keep up.

“As long as they need to,” he replied in Spanish too.

“I understand we want the little boy to stay here, but why does she have to stay?” Her tone turned whiny and I had to bite the inside of my cheek to stop myself from saying something snappy.

“She’s his mother.” Raphael’s tone was clear. He wouldn’t tolerate being questioned.

“I can’t believe she slept with the old man,” Beatrice snickered, again in Spanish. “Probably a gold digger. No principles. One of those whores that like to spread her legs for anyone with money.”

It took everything in me not to shoot up and punch the woman in the face. Jesus, when did I become so violent? Still, the need to put her in her place made my hand shake with anger.

Maybe later. For now, I’d pretend I didn’t speak any Spanish.

To the world, I was the one that had the baby. So of course, she’d assume since I was Gabriel’s mother, that I slept with Raphael’s father. Either way, the insinuation didn’t sit well with me. Lombardo Santos raped Anya. Father had forced her, but Anya refused to tell me why. That secret died with her.

“Beatrice, choose your next word wisely or you won’t like what comes next,” Raphael said softly, but a hint of vehemence screamed through. Fuck, there was something sexy when he spoke in Spanish.

“She was your father’s and you hated your father,” she continued her ranting in Spanish.

I held my breath, waiting for Raphael to correct her. He didn't.

Did Raphael really hate his father? I wondered.

I wouldn't ask him now. There'd be time for that later, when we were alone.

"Have you worked here for a long time, Beatrice?" I asked, meeting her eyes and smiling sweetly. She wouldn't know it was a fake smile, not unless she knew me.

"Yes."

"You bang your boss?" I asked, keeping my voice measured.

I didn't give a shit if she did or didn't, but fuck if I'd let her degrade me. Or my sister. She didn't know what Anya endured that night. Nobody did, except for Aurora, Willow, and me. We'd had front row seats to the fucked up show.

My eyes skimmed up the table to find Raphael's gaze already on me. His expression sparked with dry amusement, but Beatrice fumed, a string of Spanish curses leaving her mouth.

"You going to let her talk to me that way?" Beatrice hissed, her eyes flashing with anger.

Raphael didn't even spare her a glance.

"Caine will take you back to the mainland," he spoke casually. "You'll be compensated for the next six months."

A sharp gasp sounded and I half expected her to grab her chest in theatrics. She didn't. Instead, she took a large vase, ready to throw it at me when Raphael shot up and grabbed her wrist.

"I wouldn't if I were you," he warned, his voice deadly calm but venom coated each spoken word, giving me the glimpse of the ruthless mobster he was.

Before I could even blink my eyes, two guards showed up and escorted her out of the kitchen, then out of the home while her rapid Spanish words followed behind her.

Once we could no longer hear her, Raphael finally spoke up, "Now, let's talk."

I cocked my eyebrow. “And we couldn’t have talked before you dismissed your girlfriend?”

“Beatrice is not my girlfriend,” he explained calmly. “She never has been.”

I scoffed softly. “She might not have gotten that memo.”

He shrugged. “That’s her problem. Now let’s talk about our future.”

“There’s no ‘*our*’ future,” I snickered. “So let’s not get ahead of ourselves.”

The look he gave me said something otherwise, but I didn’t care to evaluate it. Maybe he expected I’d call him out on it or maybe he’d thought I’d start ranting. I did neither. Anya taught me a long time ago that sometimes it was best to keep your opinions to yourself. Until you had the upper hand.

In this case, and with this man, I worried I’d never get the upper hand. After all, he was a criminal. The devil. Though the man was definitely suave and charismatic, I couldn’t forget what his father had done to Anya. What he had almost done to *us* - my best friends and me.

“Did you really hate your father?” I asked him, keeping my gaze on him.

His eyes darkened, something cruel and full of venom passed his gaze but it disappeared just as quickly as it appeared.

“He wasn’t my most favorite person.” A small admission, but something about it gave me hope.

“Mine either,” I murmured. I cleared my throat. “Neither yours nor mine. In fact, I’d be okay if I never saw my father again,” I clarified.

He nodded as if he understood and I believed he did. It was peculiar what people bonded over.

“And your mom?” I asked hesitantly. Maybe I was pushing it, but if I married him, I needed to know at least something about the man. Outside his criminal activity.

“I was my mother’s favorite.” A flicker of pain and regret crossed his expression. “She was a good woman, but my father’s cruelty destroyed her. When she died, she was only a shell of the woman she used to be. Addicted to cocaine and seeking relief in oblivion.”

He loved his mother. He didn’t say it but he didn’t have to. And that alone made me think there was a lot more to Raphael Santos than meets the eye.

“I’m sorry.” And I really was. I didn’t like the hint of pain that lingered in his eyes. “Anya was that for me. My mother. My father. My sister.”

Silence filled the air and fragile bonds weaved through it. It scared me and thrilled me. It confused me and settled me. I couldn’t understand it.

“You understand Spanish.” It wasn’t a question, but a clear statement.

“So?” I challenged. “You understand English.”

He ran a hand across his mouth, rumbling out some unintelligible Spanish words.

“We really need to talk,” he finally said. “About us.”

“We’re already talking,” I said dryly. Something about the way he looked at me had my internal alarm going off, and I’d be damned if I’d ignore my sixth sense ever again. “And didn’t we already establish there is no *us*.”

“There is something you need to read.” It didn’t escape me that he ignored my comment about *us*.

My phone beeped and temporarily forgetting about the man in front of me, I pulled my phone out of my back pocket. My brows furrowed seeing it was a message from an unknown number.

I slid the message open. It was an attachment.

Probably spam, I thought and I was just about to delete it when Raphael’s voice stopped me.

“You might want to open that.” My eyes snapped to him while my finger hovered over the keyboard.

“Why?” I asked, hesitantly.

“Because you’ll need to read it.” When I remained still, he continued, “It’s an agreement made by your parents.”

Dread filled the pit of my stomach and the old familiar anxiety touched my skin. In all my life, nothing good ever came out of my parents. Maybe they weren’t criminals like Raphael’s father, but it was only because they never got their hands dirty. They had others to do the dirty work for them.

I opened the attachment and my eyes skimmed the letters. My fingers trembled and with each shuddering breath my heart sank further and further. Nothing made your day worse than your parents proving your gut feeling right.

My father sold me to Santiago Tijuana. They wanted Gabriel dead.

I knew they didn’t care for him, but this was beyond the realm of even my fear. I scrolled back to the beginning of the document to check the date of the agreement. One week ago.

Fear crept into the corners of my mind. Memories hurt. It was like standing too close to the fire while the flames licked your skin but being unable to move. Even after seven years of keeping my distance, the two people who should have had Anya’s and my best interest at heart, hurt us the most.

“Little girls deserve to be punished.”

Each breath felt like shards of glass cutting my lungs.

“Stay hidden, Sailor.” My lungs iced over. “*No matter what,” Anya said, “stay quiet.”*

The bed creaked above me, suffocating me.

I bit harder, tasting blood. My hand hurt.

Whimpers. Grunts.

My lungs tightened, the old nightmares slamming against the doors, eager to break free. I wouldn’t let them. I couldn’t let them.

For Gabriel. For me.

I bit harder into my hand, the blood trickling down my skin. Sticky. Smelly. Warm.

Terror crawled up my spine. My skin felt clammy. I was suffocating.

Two large hands cupped my face. A blurry face. His mouth moved. My brain couldn't process his words.

My entire body shook. I needed someone to save me. It was always about being saved. Anya saved me from *him.* Our father.

"Breathe, Reina." The voice was deep and soft. Vehement. I couldn't drag a single breath into my lungs. "Focus on my voice and breathe." I closed my eyes and listened. "Open your eyes and breathe."

His face slowly came into focus. Tanned skin. Blue eyes. "You're safe here." His scent registered. *Safe.* He'd keep us safe.

I pressed my face into the crook of his neck, his warmth and strength seeping into me. It was like an injection of everything I needed for my heart to finally ease its race. I rested my face against his neck, while his hands found their way to my back, running them up and down, soothing me.

The devil pulled me back from the nightmare. My decision was made.

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Chapter Twenty-Six

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RAPHAEL

"All good?" I asked her calmly, though deep down my rage boiled. Something or someone must have hurt this woman to cause such pain.

"Yes," she muttered, looking anywhere but at me. "The document was…" pause, "unexpected." She swallowed hard and forced a smile. Truthfully, I wasn't sure whether she knew about it or not up until the moment she had her breakdown.

"Family, huh?" she attempted to scoff, but it came out too weak.

It wasn't exactly the reaction I expected from her. Clearly she didn't know about the agreement her parents made with Santiago Tijuana. The panic in her eyes was too real, like ghosts she'd kept hidden for too long.

Her parents sold her out. Both her and her son. To one of the most sadistic men on the planet. History was repeating itself. First, they sold Anya. Now it was her turn.

"There are better families," was all I said. "You make it with the people that have your back."

She nodded as if she understood and I believed she did.

Keeping a wary expression on her face, she leaned back into her chair, and I realized she needed space. I couldn't

blame her. It wasn't every day you find out your parents had a contract out for you and your son.

So I allowed it. This time.

I took my seat next to her and downed my coffee. She needed some time to get herself together.

There was more to Sailor's story than the file Nico secured for me.

It was written in the panic attack I had just witnessed. In the nightmare she woke up from when we were in the plane. Almost as if she was abused or witnessed it firsthand. Did that bastard father of hers use her to settle his own debt?

None of Nico's files reflected that, and he was very thorough.

Those remarkable blue eyes met my gaze and her tongue swept across her bottom lip before she spoke up.

"What if I refused to marry you?" she asked softly.

A sardonic breath left me. I wished she'd marry me because she felt this attraction brewing between us. It was part of the air we breathed. And here she was questioning what would happen if she didn't. I'd burn down the whole fucking world, that's what would happen.

"I have many enemies, Sailor. And word will spread that Gabriel is a Santos. I'll keep you both safe. From your parents, from Santiago Tijuana and anyone else," I vowed. I'd protect her even if she refused to marry me but I wouldn't tell her that. "The most efficient way to do so is for you to marry me."

Her shoulders slumped a bit and something about it reminded me of a tired angel. Her thick waves covered her slim shoulders, like a crown that was too heavy to carry.

"I called my mom, you know," she started softly, her eyes darting to the window. "From the cabin. I hadn't talked to her since Anya died but I thought-" She chewed on her bottom lip as if it hurt her to say her sister's name. "I thought maybe she had at least one motherly instinct. She

refused to help me, but I made a mistake. I told her I was at one of Ashford's places. Both my parents knew the location of the cabin. If I had to guess, it was how Santiago Tijuana found us."

I stilled at her admission. Not because I was surprised, but because it showed her fragile trust. It bloomed like a delicate flower between us and I'd do anything to keep it.

"Byron came to the same conclusion," I said and her eyes flashed in surprise. "He called me during our flight. He was ready to come after me."

Her full lips curved into a soft smile. "The Ashford brothers are fond of Gabriel."

"And you."

She let out a heavy breath. "They pretty much saved Gabriel and me. Byron and Royce stood up to my parents and then set Gabriel and me up so I could finish college. Without Aurora, Willow, and them, who knows where we'd have ended up."

Fuck, I wished it was me that was with her through it all. I thought I was doing her a service by not hunting her down and pulling her to the pits of hell with me. It turned out it was where she would have been safe. Under my protection.

"You'd have found a way." And I meant it. Despite her vulnerability, she had a quiet kind of strength. And stubbornness.

I watched her delicate, pale neck bob as she swallowed and our gazes locked. Staring at her was like staring at the light, or crystal blue ocean that you want to drown in. Because it would be the best kind of way to go.

"Raphael?"

"Yes?"

"If something happens to me-"

"Nothing will happen to you," I growled. This world would burn in the fires of hell if it dared take her away from me.

A small smile touched her lips. “You can be scary, you know.” Her eyes flickered to my hand. “Is that why you have those words tattooed on your hand?”

I shook my head. “I was six the first time I killed a man. I stabbed him sixty-six times. People took it as a bad omen.” She gave me a confused look. “Six-six-six. It’s a sign of the devil.”

“Oh.”

“Scared?”

She tilted her head, studying me. There was no fear in her eyes. “No. Not sure why, but no, I’m not.”

“Good.” Because her lightness might just be my salvation.

We sat in silence, both of us lost in our own thoughts. Sometimes I feared I’d become my father. I’ve lived and breathed cruelty for as long as I could remember. When I killed the first man for raping a woman, our maid, my father was proud. Not for defending an innocent maid, but for being savage.

It was my mother who called me a savior. I guess saviors came in all shapes and sizes.

“My parents hated Anya so much.” Sailor broke the silence, heavy with the ghosts of our pasts. I could hear pain in her voice and felt it as if it was my own. “If you’re the devil, can you please shove my parents into the last level of Dante’s inferno?”

“For you, anything,” I told her slightly amused. “You know, they didn’t deserve you and your sister,” I told her softly.

I’d find out every single thing about them and then chase her ghosts away. Yes, the woman was slightly infuriating. Gorgeous, smart, and opinionated. Strong, too, despite the fear she held buried somewhere deep down. And I fucking loved every single thing about her.

It had only been less than twenty-four hours since I dropped the marriage condition on her. And it was only now

that she gave her agreement that I felt relief wash over me. Not that she really had a choice. But for appearance's sake, I'd let her think she did. Because this devil would follow his woman to the ends of this Earth.

Everything about her intrigued me. I kept saying it was to keep my brother safe, but I was fucking lying to myself. Consequences be damned, I wanted *her*. Just like the devil - I aimed for her soul, heart, and body. I was way too invested in this impending marriage. In her. I had been for a very long time.

And the girl didn't even fucking remember me. For eight long years, she lurked in my mind. I even tried to find her. To no avail. She used a fake ID to enter the club. Never in my wildest dreams had I thought she'd land in my fucking lap.

It turned out I had a Nikolaev to thank again. They just kept on giving, didn't they?

"So what are you going to do now without your cook?" Sailor asked abruptly changing subjects, her eyes locked on the window overlooking the ocean. "It will be hard to find another good-looking cook."

"Are you jealous, *Reina de nieve?*"

Sailor straightened up, slight embarrassment coloring her cheeks, but she still looked fucking hot. I could only imagine how good she'd look in my bed. Because that was where we were heading.

Of course, she wouldn't know it until she landed there.

"I told you," she gritted. "Don't call me ice queen. Or you won't like the name I come up with to describe you, fucking diablo."

I chuckled. Her backbone delighted me. "It means snow queen."

She blinked in confusion. Then she blinked again. "Why didn't you correct me the first time?"

I chuckled. "I like rattling you."

Her brows scrunched. "Why snow queen?"

My eyes traveled over her hair. She raised her hand, self-consciously combing her fingers through it. “I know it’s weird,” she muttered. “People call it gray.”

“It’s fucking gorgeous,” I rasped. The most beautiful sight I had ever seen. “And it certainly isn't gray. It reminds me of a freshly fallen snow with the hint of sun glittering across its surface. I love it.”

Fuck, I might love the way she blushed even more. “Thanks,” she whispered softly.

“I have a gift for you,” I told her casually.

“I’m scared to ask,” she muttered. “There is a devious look in your eyes.” I threw my head back and laughed. Hard. She grinned as if she was pleased by the sound. “Is it the fires of hell? Devil’s pitchfork?” she questioned, though her smile still lingered on her lips.

My lip tipped up. “Not quite.”

“Then, please do tell,” she grumbled.

I pulled out my phone and typed a message to Diego. “You’ll see.”

She glanced around, as if she expected the domain of hell to overtake the kitchen. It was amusing as fuck.

Diego walked in at that moment, cradling a blanket. Without a word he strode toward Sailor who instinctively backed away from him.

“I don’t bite,” he said dryly. “Take him.”

“Him?” she muttered, confusion marring her expression. Her eyes darted my way, then back to Diego.

“Raphael picked him out for you,” Diego explained. Then seeing that Sailor had no intention of extending her arm, he set the package on the table in front of her.

The blanket started moving and a soft squeal escaped Sailor’s lips when a small head pushed through. “What-”

Her voice faltered and she leaned closer. “Is that a-” Those blue eyes raised and met mine. “Is that an animal?”

She swallowed hard, then lowered her gaze. Like she was scared, she reached out her hand and removed the

blanked. A little chocolate brown French Bulldog, barely eight-weeks-old peeked his head out. Sailor's eyes widened and her mouth parted.

"A dog," she rasped. Her fingers shook as she went to pet him. "It's a dog," she repeated in a whisper.

"Yes." *Do you remember?* I wanted to ask. During our first dance she told me she wanted a dog.

But it was too soon to bring it up. Instead, I just watched as both the puppy and the woman shook. It would be funny, yet something about it warmed my heart. Yeah, this devil was getting mushy.

The puppy raised to his feet and Sailor instinctively set her arms around him so he wouldn't fall. He wobbled on his feet, pushing his nuzzle into the palm of her hand.

"Oh my gosh," she whispered. "It's a real dog."

"Would you prefer a fake dog?" Diego, forever grouchy, grumbled.

It didn't bother Sailor one bit. A wide grin spread on her face. "I like him. He's so tiny. Is he sick?"

"No, Reina," I assured her. "It's a French Bulldog. They are small."

"Oh." Her eyes remained glued to him, as if she was scared, he'd disappear if she blinked.

"What are you going to name him?" I asked her.

Her head swished up, her eyes darting between me and Diego. "Me?"

I chuckled. "Yes, you. It's your dog now."

Her eyeballs almost popped out of her sockets. "Really?"

"Yes, really." Her bottom lip quivered, but she got herself together quickly. Her reaction amused me to no end. A badass reporter willing to take down the cartel got all mushy about a little puppy. "Are you going to name him?" I asked.

The puppy was getting more and more comfortable with Sailor, his tail wagging wildly. Gently, she scooped him up, then stood up from her seat and set him on the floor. She

lowered down on her knees. I wasn’t sure that I liked that she forgot about me so easily, but fuck it. She seemed happy.

I nodded at Diego and he made himself scarce.

“I don’t know,” she murmured. “Maybe Gabriel and I can come up with a name together.”

A tear rolled down her face and I came down to my haunches. “I thought a puppy would make you happy. Why are you sad?”

She shook her head, the glimmering depths of the ocean meeting me head on.

“I’m not sad,” she whispered

But ghosts lurked in her eyes and her lip quivered while she tried hard to steel her emotions. Our gazes locked, the pain in her shimmering depths slammed through me like a violent storm.

“I never had a dog before,” she admitted, lowering her eyes back to the puppy who already cuddled into her. “Anya and I dreamt of owning one together one day.”

“There's a first time for everything.” She nodded, her eyes still on the little puppy sniffing around. It was an odd kind of dog, but I didn’t think Sailor would warm up to a German Shepherd or a Husky. At least not as her first dog.

A soft chuckle. “Bruno?”

“Hmm?” I asked her, confused. I had no fucking idea who Bruno was. Better not be another man.

“Do you like Bruno for the puppy?” she asked, her hand scratching his ear as he pushed his small head against her, his eyes drooping.

“I like it.”

She grinned. “Me too. We’ll see if Gabriel likes it. If he does, then Bruno it is.”

With the puppy sound asleep, she tucked the blanket safely around him and rose to her feet, then sat back down at the table. And all the while, she kept smiling. Happy looked good on her.

“We have to come to terms about my proposition,” I said, keeping my eyes on her. She stiffened, but she didn’t look my way. Instead, her gaze focused on her own cup of coffee as she blew steam off of it.

“Why do I have a feeling it’s a trap?” she muttered and amusement filled me. The woman had good instincts. There was no need to prolong this shit so I went straight to it.

“I’ll keep you and your son safe. All you have to do is put my ring on your finger.”

Her eyes met my heavy stare. I could see a range of emotions pass those deep oceans - from disbelief to suspicion to resignation.

Okay, so that could have come out better. I should have practiced. It wasn’t every day you proposed to a woman. I knew Sailor would be a distraction of the worst kind. The kind of vice that would be hard to give up. Barely a day in my home and she had me firing my cook.

Yet, I knew nothing would stop me. The thought of not having her was somehow worse. Gabriel connected us and I’d be seeing her for the foreseeable future. She didn’t have a committed relationship, but eventually she would. Just the thought of it made me want to break every single man’s legs and hands, then cut their dicks off.

“You know proposals usually come with nice dinners and fancy rings,” she grumbled.

We stared at each other in thick silence, the evidence of her nervousness in the pale vein of her neck. She had the most delicate pale complexion and the urge to put my rough hands all over her rivaled the need to breathe.

“I just fired a cook so we’ll have to go out for a fancy dinner. But a fancy ring will happen. I want you to love it so you’ll have to tell me exactly what kind you like.”

“You’re joking, right?”

“I never joke about serious matters,” I told her. I wanted to grab her nape and bite into her neck, mark her. I ran my

tongue across my teeth and pushed the urge down. If she saw a glimpse of it, the delicate reporter would run.

I watched her push a strand of hair behind her ear before she finally met my gaze again. The air was tense, her big ocean blue eyes staring at me, and I waited for a bomb to detonate. Except, this woman kept it all tightly reined in. Like there were so many secrets she harbored, she didn't even know her way out of them.

The faint tick of the clock and the sound of the ocean waves were like a soothing distraction from everything but the petite, curvy body sitting next to me.

She chewed on her lip, eyeing me suspiciously and a subtle blush ran up her neck. She opened her mouth, closed it, and then opened it again, clearing her throat.

"It would be a fake marriage," she stated, framed like a question and a suggestion at the same time. "Right?"

A sardonic feeling pulled in my chest. Was this woman really that oblivious to me? Even now, the attraction brewing inside me was strong. Like a hurricane getting ready to make landfall.

I paused, weighing my options. If I told her I want to bury my cock inside her pussy and fuck her to oblivion until she forgot any and all men before me, she was sure to reject the idea of our marriage.

Even for the sake of keeping her son safe.

"Of course." *My first lie to her.*

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Chapter Twenty-Seven

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SAILOR

I'm screwed.

This was certainly not the way I envisioned a proposal. However, it would be a fake marriage. In name only. Once the threat to Gabriel was eliminated, we could end the farce and both of us could go our own way. Maybe even remain friends.

Or not. Something told me Raphael wasn't interested in friendship. At least not with me.

Yet, insecurity slithered through my veins - whether from the proposal or what I'd eventually do, I wasn't sure. But the threats were real. From the Tijuana Cartel and from my own parents.

I couldn't allow Gabriel and I to become victims. To anyone.

After reading the contract agreement between my parents and Santiago Tijuana, Raphael finding us turned out to be the best thing that could have happened to Gabriel. At least I could be sure that Raphael would keep him safe.

The panic slowly started to squeeze my chest again, but I quickly shifted my thoughts to the better alternative.

The fake marriage.

It was my best option to keep Gabriel safe. I owed my sister that much.

Staring at Raphael, I weighed all my options and kept coming back to the one Raphael just offered me. Something in the depths of those eyes that seemed to fascinate me made me believe I could trust him.

For now.

The man was intimidating. Each time I focused on his facial features, it took my breath away. Those light blue eyes made me want to lose myself in them. The five o'clock shadow that he seemed to sport all the time gave him a scruffy, sexy look. And his dark hair was almost black and long enough to grip its strands.

Yes, this man was exquisite. Gorgeous. Deadly.

It was the latter part that had me worried.

He could easily chew me up and spit me out once he was done with me. Just as his father had done with Anya.

I shook my head, chasing those images out of my mind. There were enough ghosts creeping up this morning. Besides, Raphael wasn't his father. He despised him.

Pulling my gaze up to meet his stare again, my decision was made. It wasn't like I had many choices, but I knew instinctively this was the one that would keep my son alive.

And I'd make my father pay for what he did to Anya. Both my parents. Because in my eyes, our mother was just as guilty. She let Father hurt Anya. And now, they were coming after both of us.

"Okay," I finally said, the words heavy on my tongue. "But I have stipulations."

The urge to flee was so strong, I dug my nails into my palms to remain grounded and glued to my spot. And all the while Raphael sat like a king on his throne. Of course, this was his throne, his home, his empire.

"Let's hear them, Reina." He sounded almost amused and it had me seething. Not that I'd let it show. Although I wished I could read *his* expression. It would make this so

much easier, but Raphael's poker face was too fucking good.

The devil with blue eyes that set my insides on fire. Wasn't there a saying not to trust a Colombian with blue eyes? Or was it a man with blue eyes? Fuck if I knew, it was all damn stupid.

I took a deep breath. "Okay, first. This will be a marriage in name only."

Two heartbeats. "Agreed."

Hmmm. I couldn't distinguish if that feeling in my stomach was disappointment or relief. *Definitely relief.*

"We decide together when it's the best time to tell Gabriel about his-" My words failed me for a moment. It was something I dreaded from the moment Gabriel started talking. To have to explain to him how he came to be. He hasn't started asking about his father. He thought he was my biological son. I knew everything would eventually come out.

Raphael didn't bother waiting for me to come up with the right words. "Agreed."

Okay, so far so good. Maybe the day was looking up.

"We'll be discreet about seeing other people," I continued.

"No."

"But-"

"That's a hard no," he gritted, his voice full of determination and his eyes burning with something that had my thighs clenching.

"Don't you want to hear my reasoning," I protested weakly.

"You. Will. Not. See. Other. Men." His voice was soft and vehement, underlined with something I couldn't quite pinpoint.

My mouth opened and closed like a fish, gulping for air. After the first two agreements, I expected this one to be the easy one.

“So how… when…” I couldn’t form the question.

“Let me make this clear to you, Sailor.” He leveled me with a look that sent shivers down my spine. “I see you with another man, I’ll kill him. It won’t be a quick death either. I’ll slice his hands for touching you and his dick for getting hard for you because the cabrón will never even have a chance to touch you with it.”

I took a deep inhale and then blew the air out in a measured exhale. Something about this man unsettled me. It must be his savage words or maybe the way he watched me. Like he would devour me if I let him.

I swallowed hard. “So celibacy for as long as we’re married? But don’t you have… ummm… needs?” When he didn’t respond, I continued, “It’s hypocritical for you to have other women and not grant me the same with other men.”

The corner of his beautiful lips lifted and my heart pattered to an awkward beat. Like the fluttering of wings against the glass jar.

“It doesn’t have to be a relationship with celibacy,” he drawled in a lazy tone that made my pussy throb. “No other women for me and no other men for you. When you feel the need for sex, you come to me.”

I watched him confused. Did he expect me to say *likewise*? He stood up and instantly I jumped up, worried he’d test the theory now. He took a step toward me and I took one back. Another step forward, and the chair hit the back of my knees. His height made me feel small, his six foot three or four frame towering over me.

“Seriously?” I breathed appalled. And so damn turned on, I thought I’d melt.

“Yes, seriously.” His hand reached out and tucked the piece of hair behind my ear. “After all, we’ll be married so what’s to hold us back.” He was right. Why hold back? I immediately mentally slapped myself. I needed to get a grip.

“Well, for starters this is an arrangement,” I spurted out. “A fake marriage. There is no such thing as fake sex.”

Fuck, was it hot in here or what? I pressed my cool palm on my burning cheek and Raphael smiled so devastatingly beautiful, I was ready to test out the fake sex.

“This is a bad idea,” I muttered more to myself than him.

“It’s a good idea,” he contradicted me, his voice almost a purr. Like he was already working on trying to seduce me. “I’ll keep you and Gabriel safe. And everything else-” he shrugged his shoulder, “-will work itself out.”

“Jesus, if that’s your strategy to get through life, we’re fucked,” I grumbled.

He threw his head back and laughed. A carefree, deep laugh that I felt vibrate through every fiber of my being.

“You certainly have a way with words, Reina.”

He bent his head, his mouth only a breath away from me. And the urge to close the distance was so great, I had to grit my teeth not to cave into my desire.

This man was pure temptation. And I feared I wouldn’t be able to resist him.

“When?” I choked out.

“When what?”

“When would we get married?” I barely got the last word out.

What have I gotten myself into?

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Chapter Twenty-Eight

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RAPHAEL

I left Sailor and Gabriel on my island.

As my chopper lifted up into the air, I spotted two figures on the balcony, tight in a hug and fussing over a little French Bulldog. It was a good call to get the puppy. Both Sailor and Gabriel were already attached to him.

They had been in my home for two days and already the entire manor buzzed with life. I liked it.

It took only two hours to land back in D.C.

"Back so soon," Nico greeted me at the airport as I exited my plane. "Visiting your soon-to-be in-laws?"

It wasn't surprising he knew my plans. I applied for a marriage license yesterday. Nothing escaped Nico and his company.

"It will be a joyous occasion," I sneered. Sailor's words still rubbed me the wrong way. I'd rather shoot her father dead, but that would bring more trouble to her door. The only reason I wasn't taking that route was for her and Gabriel. "Were you able to find out how people found her and Gabriel at the cabin?"

"I did. Santiago got a call from an untraceable number shortly after Sailor's call with her mother. I was able to pin the rough location where the call originated from. Definitely close to the McHale residence."

Perfect. Finding out this information just as I was about to head to pay a visit to her parents didn't bode well. The urge to kill her fucking parents grew by the second.

"Want me to go with you?" Nico offered.

"Are you offering so you can assist me in killing her old man, or so you can prevent me from killing him?" I grumbled.

He chuckled. "Whichever you prefer." He shoved his hands into his suit pockets. "Though it might stir the pot killing the fucker. He has connections."

That was the unfortunate part.

"Thanks for the offer, but no need to tag along. I'll give the old bastard fair warning," I told him. "If I hear another peep about the fucking contract with the Tijuana Cartel, I'll end them both. So whatever he got paid by Santiago Tijuana, he better refund it. I might offer to buy him out."

He nodded. "Money talks with that greedy bastard. I have men watching their house. No sign of anything out of the ordinary."

"There should be no trouble," I acknowledged. "Nobody besides Diego and I know we're paying a visit."

We had set up two decoy cars, as well as one to scope out the terrain. It was just an extra precaution. I'd be damned if I'd miss my own wedding in just two days.

Nico and I shook hands. "Thank you for your help," I told him.

"Of course. We'll see you in two days." Nico's mouth twitched and I knew the next thing out of his mouth would be a smartass comment. "Should I bring my kids or leave them at home? I don't want them to see you dragging your bride down the aisle."

Fucking asshole.

"Sailor agreed to marry me," I smirked. "I seem to recall you punched your wife's friend on your wedding day."

"All in the past," Nico snickered. I shook my head as I slid into the car.

It took us about an hour to get to the McHale manor, right outside Richmond, Virginia. The large estate was surrounded by tall walls and guards at the gate.

I pushed the button and the window slid down. The security guard saw our faces. It was the man I put on my payroll.

“I’m here to see Mr. and Mrs. McHale,” I told him.

With his terse nod, the gate slid open. Diego drove down the long driveway until we pulled around the circular driveway to the front of the house.

Parking, he exited the car and came around to open my door. He gave the appearance of being just my driver, when in fact he was one of my best enforcers. I exited the car and headed up the grand staircase.

Before I reached the entrance, the door swung open.

There was no mistaking who the woman that opened the door was. She didn’t have platinum blonde hair like Sailor, but her face resembled her daughter’s. She was a beautiful woman, but unlike her daughter, everything about her was a cold, almost cruel beauty.

Her mother stumbled as her gaze locked on me. Slowly, she looked me up and down, then her lip curled in disgust. The words Sailor told me at our first meeting rushed back to the forefront of my mind. She said her parents hated Hispanics.

Turns out, Sailor wasn’t exaggerating.

“Mrs. McHale.” I walked up to her and took her hand. “Raphael Santos. Your husband will recognize the name.”

She flinched, then paled, and I let out a sardonic breath.

“We weren’t expecting you,” her mother remarked, clear confusion evident in her voice.

“I have some news I want to share with you and your husband,” I said, my lips tipping up into a smirk. “I know you’ll be thrilled to learn that your family will be forming a permanent connection to a Colombian one.”

If I thought she was pale before, it didn't compare to her complexion now. Her eyes looked like they were about to burst from their sockets.

"Lead the way, Mrs. McHale," I urged in a cold voice.

She didn't move so, just to ensure she understood the option to deny me wasn't on the table, I added, "It's about the contract he put out on my half-brother and your daughter, Sailor. You know, the Hispanic half-brother of mine that your eldest daughter gave birth to."

She remained immobile. My patience ran thin. "Would you like me to pull out my gun and incentivize you?"

That finally got her moving. She led the way across the foyer and down a hallway, her back stiff. She opened a door and entered what looked like an office. I gave her no chance to slam the door and give a heads up to her husband.

She was forced to step further into the room or risk me shoving her out of the way. The moment I saw the bastard, I fought the urge to pull out my gun and shoot him.

Instead, I clenched my hand into a fist. It was better than grabbing my gun or his throat, then kicking the shit out of him. So, I inhaled deeply and kept a tight lid on my control.

"McHale," I greeted him, meeting his confused stare. He recognized me immediately. Not because we have met before but because he knew exactly who I was. And my resemblance to my father. Unlike Sailor, who was a mixture of both her parents, her platinum blonde hair courtesy of her old man.

"Santos." He wasn't so brave now.

"I'll make this short," I started, smiling smugly. "And relatively painless." *Maybe*. "Sailor and Gabriel are under my protection. My family. I won't tolerate *any* threats aimed at them." I let the words sink through his thick skull for a moment before I continued. "And let me make it perfectly clear. If you attempt anything, I won't hesitate to

leak your contract with Santiago Tijuana to the press. Nor the contract you had with my father and Benito King." His face paled, but then he shook himself and looked between his wife and me. "You sold out your eldest to my father through the Belles and Mobster's agreement, and your youngest to Santiago Tijuana."

His hand flew down, hitting his desk.

"My daughters are my business," he hissed, pure venom dripping from his mouth. How a man like that could produce a beautiful woman like Sailor was beyond me.

I prowled toward him and pulled the knife at the same time and plunged it into his hand, resting against the desk.

Sailor's old man let out a loud yelp, so fucking loud it could have shattered the glass.

"That's where you're wrong," I taunted back, locking eyes with him. "Sailor is my business. I will ensure my wife and my brother are safe at all costs."

Game. Set. Match. Motherfucker.

His face turned red, ready to explode. Beads of sweat on his forehead and blood pooling around his wrinkly old hand, soaking into his skin, and his fancy McHale family crescent ring.

I wanted him to give me a reason to kill him, so I'd end him once and for all. For Sailor. For Gabriel.

"Sailor cannot be your wife," he bellowed. "She's promised to Santiago."

I leaned closer toward him, suddenly my gun out of my holster and pointed at his miserable skull.

"You ever mention Sailor and Santiago in the same sentence again, I'm going to have you killed and buried at the bottom of the Potomac River. Understood?"

He didn't acknowledge at first, his free hand clenching. He reached for a glass on his desk. Scotch and ice. He gripped it hard as he brought it to his mouth. It was clear by the way he held it with white knuckles that he barely held on to his control.

“Consider Sailor payment for the Belles and Mobsters agreement,” I drawled with a lazy, autocratic stare. He didn’t need to know Sailor already agreed to marry me. “After all, it’s still an unpaid debt,” I taunted.

Come on, fucker. Lose your control, my mind whispered, urging him to show me his true colors. My gut feeling warned his colors were even darker than anyone had ever seen. Except for maybe his family.

“Do. You. Understand?”

He nodded. I’d stake my life that he didn’t.

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Chapter Twenty-Nine

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SAILOR

My eyes flickered to the clock on the wall. It was a little past five.

Gabriel and I sat in the garden in the back of the house. The long infinity pool stretched to our left, while a large green lawn stretched on the right.

Bruno and Gabriel ran around the lawn, chasing each other. Or maybe just running in circles. I couldn't quite tell.

My son was in heaven here.

I glanced at my phone. No messages from Raphael. I couldn't decide whether that was good or bad. I kind of expected my soon-to-be husband to check in. Why? I had no idea. We barely knew each other.

Now that I agreed to marry him, I felt kind of lost. I had no idea when Raphael expected us to marry. But I knew I wanted my friends and the Ashford brothers there. They had done so much for me and were a big part of Gabriel's life.

I slid my phone open and dialed Aurora.

"Sailor!" She answered on the first ring. "What is going on? Byron said you're with Raphael Santos. What. The. Fuck?"

"Hello to you too," I retorted dryly. Not that I could blame her. I would have the same exact reaction if the roles

were reversed.

"I was worried sick," she muttered. "Are you okay?"

I sighed. That was a loaded question. So many damn things happened, I didn't even know where to start.

"Yes, Gabriel and I are okay," I finally told her. "After Santiago Tijuana got out on bail, I asked Royce if I could stay at the cabin until the dust settled. I never expected Santiago to find us. Thankfully, Raphael got to us early enough to get us out."

"Jesus Christ."

"How are you?" I asked her. "Everything okay with the scary man?"

She chuckled. "Yes, everything is perfect. Finally."

My lips curved into a smile. I loved hearing happiness in her voice. She deserved it after years of chasing the man who kidnapped her brother.

"I'm so happy for you, Aurora."

"Thank you. I want you to be happy too."

My eyes traveled over the horizon. I couldn't say that I was unhappy. But happy? I didn't know. Maybe I didn't know how to be happy.

"I'm going to marry Raphael Santos," I blurted out.

A long pause followed.

"Are you sure that's wise?" she asked. It was a reasonable question.

"He knows about Gabriel," I told her. "He saved me twice already. And turns out my parents sold me to Santiago Tijuana. I'm out of options."

"Your parents did what?" she shouted into the phone. "My brothers will protect you," she reasoned.

"I don't want them in the middle of this," I retorted. "You and your family have done so much for me. You and Willow helped me survive those first few years with an infant. If something happened to you or them, I'd never forgive myself."

“My brothers are big boys. They can take care of you and themselves.” I chuckled. They *were* big boys! “You know–” She hesitated. “I always thought you and Royce would end up together one day.”

Shock traveled through me. “Why would you think that?”

“Because you and Royce always clicked. Yes, everyone talked about what a political match you and Aaron Kennedy would make. But you never trusted him the way you trusted Royce. You two were like the same side of the coin.”

I thought back to all the times that Royce came through. All the comfort he offered. But it was always as friends.

“We were just friends,” I assured her.

Her soft chuckle came over the line. “I know, but I guess I hoped we’d be sisters.”

It was my turn to laugh. “We don’t need that to be sisters. You and Willow have been with me through thick and thin.”

“Although, we’ll be kind of distant sisters-in-law if you marry Raphael.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, Raphael is half-brother to Alexei’s half-sister, Isabella Nikolaev. So it connects us.”

Small world. I couldn’t even begin to comprehend how that came to be. Each family had some crosses to bear. It turned out the Nikolaev family wasn’t an exception.

“Those are some complicated family relationships, huh?” I retorted dryly.

“For sure,” she muttered. “I mean look at my father. He got a woman pregnant before he married my mother. He knows he had an illegitimate son. He even knows who he is. Does he care? Fuck no. Same with his illegitimate daughter.”

“Are you still checking up on her?”

“Damn straight,” she retorted. “I hope one day I’ll get to meet her. All of us would have a Christmas together, drink

and eat, have little ones run around. And Sailor?”

“Yes?”

“I fully intend to have you at that Christmas party.”

My heart warmed at her kindness. “How did I get so lucky to have you as my friend?”

“My charming personality,” she retorted and we both chuckled.

I sighed. “Can you do me a big favor?”

“Anything.”

“My gut feeling is telling me Raphael is nothing like his father.” She knew what I meant. Seeing Lombardo Santos raping my sister tainted all of us. We were scared little girls, trapped in a nightmare. Willow and Aurora were able to move on. I hadn’t. “But I need confirmation from someone who knows better. I’m scared to trust myself.”

My outlook on sex had been tainted from the moment I saw my father force himself on Anya. Seeing Lombardo rape her only reinforced that fear.

Oddly enough when I was with Raphael, I felt some of that fear and anxiety ease.

A tense silence followed.

“I already have. The moment Byron told me Raphael had you, I asked Alexei. He said Raphael is a good man.” There was something else there. I could practically hear ‘and’ dancing in the air. “And he’s the one who told Raphael about you and Gabriel.”

“What?” I choked out.

“When he and I were in Russia, I had a nightmare,” she admitted. “He said I told him in my sleep that Santos hurt Anya. He was ready to kill Raphael but I told him it was the old Santos.”

Well, at least I knew it wasn’t me who brought Raphael to our door.

“Please don’t be mad, Sailor.”

“I’m not,” I whispered. “I just want to get through all this alive and see Gabriel grow up. Safe and healthy. Like I

promised Anya.”

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Chapter Thirty

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SAILOR

Palm trees lined our path towards the beach. The rustling of green leaves and sound of the ocean crashing against the shoreline could almost make me believe I was at a resort vacationing. Almost.

“Come on, Bruno,” Gabriel urged our new little puppy. Apparently French Bulldogs were lazy as fuck. Cute but lazy. We’ve taken three breaks since we left the house, and the walk from the manor to the beach was barely half a mile.

“I guess it’s time for another break,” I told my son, smiling.

He didn’t mind. He was enthralled with our new family addition. And when I told him it was a gift from Raphael, he seemed to love the guy even more. Both of us lowered onto the ground and sat down, the puppy already snoring.

The humidity and heat stifled all three of us. Even the white, silk dress I wore felt too heavy against my skin. Heat, Florida and I didn’t mesh well. Nor Bruno. Gabriel, on the other hand, loved it.

“Have you done your homework, Gabriel?” I asked him. Thankfully, I was able to come to an arrangement with his teachers. As long as we kept up with the lessons and turned in the homework when due, she’d give him credit.

“Most of it. I only have my math left to do.”

“Good job,” I praised. Bruno flipped over, exposing his white belly. I didn’t know much about dogs, but I thought he had interesting coloring. His fur was brown with snow white paws and an even whiter belly. Rubbing his belly softly, I listened to his almost purring.

“Mom?”

I raised my eyes to find Gabriel’s expression furrowed. “Yes?”

“Are we going to stay here forever?”

I shook my head. “No, not forever.”

“When can I go back to school?”

I sighed. I knew the question was coming. Gabriel, unlike other children, loved going to school. He loved learning and loved the social aspect of it.

“I’m not sure, buddy,” I told him honestly. “But I hope it won’t take very long. We just have to make sure it’s safe before we go back.”

“Do you think Grandma and Grandpa McHale will let us go back?”

“Why do you bring them up?” I asked, surprised. We never spoke of my parents.

“I heard one of the men say that we can’t go back home until Grandma and Grandpa McHale are dead.” I froze. “Because they want us dead.”

Fucking people and their big mouths.

“I don’t want you to worry about Grandma and Grandpa,” I told him firmly. “We have Willow and Aurora, and her brothers.”

“And Raphael,” he added.

Ugh. He’d only known him for a few days and the kid was already in love with the man.

“Yeah,” I muttered vaguely, unwilling to confirm nor deny.

I was still unsure whether marrying him was wise. It almost felt like jumping from the proverbial frying pan into

a fire. So damn appropriate since hell was ablaze with fires and Raphael was definitely a devil. A handsome, charismatic, gorgeous fucking devil.

“What about my dad?” My head whipped to him. He had never asked about his father. Not once.

“What do you mean?” I asked, my own voice sounding strange to my own ears.

“Could he help?”

Goosebumps ran down my arms. Anything about his father had my skin crawling with disgust.

“No,” I told him, keeping my voice even.

“Why not? Aren’t dads supposed to help?”

I swallowed. He was right. Fathers were supposed to help. Except mine didn’t. Neither did my mother. And his father was dead; not that I thought he’d help.

“Yes, they are,” I finally answered. “Raphael will help us.”

Suddenly Bruno jumped, something resembling a bark vibrated through the air, distracting us both and the two of us burst into a fit of giggles.

“That’s such girlish bark, Bruno. I never heard one like it,” I teased him.

“Watch it, lady,” a deep familiar sound found us and my head shot up. “He might take that personally.”

Sure as hell, Raphael strode towards us, wearing a white t-shirt and black shorts that hung low off those mouthwatering hips. Good God, no man should look that good in shorts. Forcing my eyes to his face, I noted a five o’clock shadow grazing his jaw. He’d left yesterday and whatever he did, he didn’t get much sleep.

Maybe he hooked up and there was no sleep involved, I mused silently, though the bitterness of my tone didn’t escape me. I didn’t care. I really didn’t; it was just the principle of it. If he couldn’t keep his word about something like that, then he wouldn’t keep any of his other promises.

“Raphael!” Gabriel shot up, his eyes lit up and ran towards his brother then threw himself into his arms. Raphael caught him and swung him around, while his blue eyes met mine and a feral hunger like lust reflected in his hard gaze. All the air swished out of my lungs, both of us staring at each other and neither one of us willing to look away first.

He held my gaze, something urgent shifting like a breeze between us. The question was whether it was heading in the wrong direction.

“Sailor,” he greeted me and my eyes shifted away from him, scared I’d drown in those blue flames and forget to breathe.

I nodded.

“We missed you,” Gabriel exclaimed.

“I missed you all too.” He put Gabriel down before lowering to the ground and rubbing Bruno’s head. “Hey Bruno. Yeah, you too buddy.”

Gabriel giggled. “He’s still learning his name.”

“But you like it?” Raphael asked him and Gabriel nodded eagerly.

“Mom picked a good name.”

“She sure did,” Raphael agreed. Both their gazes, filled with mischief, flickered my way. Something pierced through my chest seeing them like that. It had never been more evident that Gabriel looked just like his brother. There was no denying it.

And despite all the shit that happened and I witnessed, some semblance of fucked up relief washed over me. Because if I had to worry about the impossible task of explaining to Gabriel one day that his grandfather was his father because he raped his mother, I couldn’t be sure I’d ever be able to do it. I’d rather kill people than have to say something like that to my son and see hurt shatter all that innocence in him.

I shot up to my feet. “Okay, let’s keep going. Or we’ll never get to the beach.”

I spun away from both of them and started walking, little Bruno trotting beside me. Sometimes he swept in and out between my legs and I watched my step. It would be bad to trample on him.

“How is life with Bruno?” Raphael caught up to me and was now walking beside me.

I side-eyed him, nothing but dry amusement in his gaze.

“Besides pooping and peeing everywhere and your housekeeper yelling that that animal is on the loose?” I noted sarcastically. “Did you do that on purpose?”

The corners of his mouth tilted. “I’ll tell my housekeeper to stop yelling and calling Bruno an animal. He’s family now.”

“Yeah, but he’s still pooping and peeing everywhere,” I remarked. “I googled and read every goddamn thing about French Bulldogs and how to train them. I’m still doing it wrong.”

Okay, I sounded a tad bit whiny.

“I’ll help you,” he offered.

“You had dogs before?” Gabriel asked him curiously and both of us stared at him expectedly.

“I had one,” Raphael admitted, rubbing his jaw. “When I was about your age, Gabriel. It was a chocolate lab. She died when I went to college.”

Gabriel’s eyes dimmed. “Why did she die?”

Raphael ruffled his brother’s hair. “She got old. Then she got sick. But not to worry, she was a very good dog and went to dog heaven.”

“Bruno’s not going to dog heaven for a very long time,” I assured Gabriel.

The puppy and Gabriel took off running, leaving me alone with Raphael. Silence followed, both of us deep in our thoughts. It was a tense, yet almost comfortable silence. Something invisible consumed us both

masquerading as a peaceful feeling. Like the calm before the storm.

"Have a good trip?" I questioned, breaking the silence.

He nodded. "I went to visit your parents."

Alert shot through me. "What?"

"I went to see your parents," he repeated, like it was the most natural thing for him to go visit my parents.

Squeak. Squeak. Anya's soft whimpers.

"But why?" I choked out, not able to drag enough air into my lungs. Every time I even thought of my parents, I was back to being that scared little girl.

The heavy breathing and whimpers invaded my memory.

I'm going to break you. My father's threats in a harsh voice, his breathing sending cold and disgusting shivers down my spine.

Hate choked my throat. My lungs squeezed.

"To warn them if they try anything against you and Gabriel, I'll fucking kill them." His voice was soft and vehement. It wasn't until his arm came around me that I realized I was holding my breath. "Breathe, Sailor."

Slowly, I exhaled, although my heart still thundered under my ribcage.

Two big, warm hands cupped my cheeks. "They no longer matter, Sailor."

He ran a thumb across my cheek, the intensity of his blue gaze shattering the memories.

"Did you-" I swallowed hard. "Did you find out if they sent Tijuana's men to the cabin?"

He nodded. "I got confirmation they gave the information of the cabin to Santiago."

A bitter laugh escaped me. "I stay out of their way and still it's not good enough."

"Your father will be too busy nursing his hand for the foreseeable future," he remarked dryly.

"They could have killed you," I rasped.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

I shook my head. It was too much history to go into. “Promise me you won’t go see them again.”

A smile touched his lips. “Careful, Reina. Or I’ll think you care about me.” I buried my face against his chest, inhaling deeply, struggling for every breath. “I’m the devil, remember? They can’t beat the devil.”

“Don’t joke around about it,” I choked.

His hands came around me, his palms rubbing my back up and down, the motion soothing. I inhaled a deep breath and slowly let air fill my lungs. The relief hit me like a wave and slowly my breathing evened out and my heart rate slowed.

“What have they done to you?”

Nothing. Everything.

I inhaled, then exhaled and took a step backward, putting some distance between us.

“Don’t go around them, Raphael.” We were still close enough for his heat to seep into my bloodstream and his scent into my lungs. “They act civilized but they are bad. Hateful and evil.”

His hand came to my face and pushed a loose strand off my forehead.

“I’m worse than them, Reina,” he rasped.

I shook my head.

“You’re not,” I whispered. “They are so much-” A hiccup escaped me. “So much worse.”

Because they hurt their own child.

I watched Raphael’s fingers fly over the screen of his phone. The moment he took his shirt off, it was game over for me.

And in front of my fucking son.

I was a bad mother. I salivated over Raphael, studying every goddamn inch of his skin. His whole upper torso was covered in tattoos. When he wore his three piece suits, it was easy to forget he was a mobster. He almost looked like a clean-cut businessman. *Almost.*

My eyes roamed down his abs and I swore, I felt drool drip down my chin. That bronze skin and ink tempted me. If only he'd take off his shorts. My toes sunk into the soft sand, relishing in the feel of it and my body relaxing with each minute spent on the beach.

After removing my sundress, revealing the bikini I wore beneath it, I waded into the water, the cool blue water lapping at me while the sun warmed my skin. I needed to cool off. Like right the fuck now. I took a deep breath of the humid air, while a breeze swept through my hair.

The water sparkled around me, coming to my thighs and leaving my tiny two piece bathing suit out of the water.

It was when Raphael put his phone away and lifted his head that I thought I'd combust. His eyes landed on me and the temperature shot up another hundred degrees. And it wasn't cold to start with.

Sweat glistened on my skin, tickling like drops of oil as it ran between my breasts.

I swallowed a loud gulp and my heart thundered a hundred miles per hour. In this heat, it was bound to give me a heart attack. Thankfully, Gabriel and the puppy played about ten feet away in the shallow water, enjoying the shade.

And I finally got my wish. Never shifting his eyes from me, he kicked off his shoes and then took off his shorts. *Finally!*

In his powerful stride, he powered through the sand and reached the crystal blue waters in a matter of seconds. He flicked a gaze to check on Gabriel and the puppy, then returned his attention to me.

I glanced around, but nobody apart from us was here. After all, it was a private island.

He stopped two feet from me. My breathing shallowed. My skin burned and it had nothing to do with the heat of the sun and everything to do with the look in his eyes.

Devouring me.

My stomach flipped, and my heart rate sped up as I imagined his mouth on me.

And I held my breath. Waiting.

He leaned closer. I could feel his warm, minty breath tickling my flesh. His fingers cradled my face and his mouth brushed against mine. His tongue swept across my bottom lip. Feather soft. Then his nose nudged against mine.

I inhaled the scent of him deep into my lungs. A mixture of ocean and *Aguardiente*.

Safety.

A loud giggle traveled through the air, mixing with the waves crashing against the shore. Both of us turned our heads in its direction to find Gabriel rolling in the shallow water while Bruno licked his face, his little nub wagging a hundred miles an hour.

Raphael's booming laughter followed and I could feel the vibration of it deep in my soul. It was a loud and contagious laugh, and I found myself smiling too.

The two of us made our way through the crystal blue waters toward them and the moment we got closer, Gabriel sat up. The happy expression on his face warmed my heart more than the heat of the southern sun. His blue eyes shone mischievously and the moment we took another step towards him, he shot to his feet and splashed us.

I squealed at the feel of the cold water against my warm skin. Without thinking, I took cover behind Raphael's big body. He went to move but I put my hands on both of his biceps.

"Don't you dare move," I giggled. "You're hot. You can cool off."

Another splash of water followed and I laughed so hard, tears pricked my eyes.

"Come on, big bad devil," I teased him, nudging him forward. "You're not scared of a little boy and a puppy, are you?"

Woof. Woof.

I peeked around Raphael's big body. Bruno was soaked by now. Barking at the waves, then biting the white caps. Gabriel was wet too, his hair sticking to his forehead and a big grin on his face.

In one swift move, before I realized what was even happening, Raphael swept me up into his arms and the next splash landed on me.

"Brrrr." I folded over and curled up further into Raphael, stealing his heat. "The water is too cold," I complained, my fists pounding on his chest. "Put me down. Now!"

"No chance," Raphael answered, grinning. "This devil quite enjoys a water fight. As long as an angel is in my arms."

Gabriel's laugh filled the air. "Mom looks just like an angel with her hair, doesn't she?"

Raphael's eyes glimmered as he watched me.

The look in them promised heaven, or maybe the most delicious sin.

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Chapter Thirty-One

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RAPHAEL

I closed the door behind me and entered the surveillance room.

The image of Sailor in that bikini burned into my brain. If there was another man on the beach, I'd have had to shoot him dead because nobody was allowed to see her like that. With her long legs and that bubblegum pink bikini, it was hard not to notice her.

Her beach tan made her waist-length platinum blonde hair stand out even more. She stood there like a water nymph, staring at me bluntly with her mouth parted and her cheeks flushed. It had my dick twitching.

But when she laughed, the whole world brightened. There was no sound like it. Her laugh was better than church bells. Better than the sweet melody of the nightingale. It made me feel whole, happier than I'd ever been.

It was then that I realized that her happiness was everything to me. Hers and Gabriel's. Because the two were closely intertwined. And I'd spend the rest of my life making both of them happy.

"Nice time at the beach?" Diego asked, his expression blank, but I knew him well enough to know the fucker

probably got a glimpse of Sailor in that goddamn bikini I'd never be able to forget.

"Is it a good time to kill you?" I retorted back dryly.

"What? I didn't see a goddamn thing," he muttered.

Caine and Diego sat at one table, while the other three men sat at the other table. My team was always on guard. Ever since I ended the agreement with the men my father dealt with, I had been prepared for any occurrence.

You never knew where and when the attack would be launched. It was a little past lunchtime and like the true Colombians they were, they preferred to drink warm coffee. No matter the temperature.

I lowered myself into the chair, my thoughts still lingering on the last conversation I had with Sailor. There was a piece of the puzzle missing and I meant to uncover it. The evidence stared back at me in the panic and terror that marred her face when she spoke of her parents.

It reminded me of the night I met her when I found that fucker feeling her up.

She still didn't remember me. Eight years and the girl left a lasting impression on me and she didn't even remember me.

It'd be funny if it wasn't me.

After we spent time on the beach, Gabriel went back to work on his homework and Sailor had some editorial work to do. With Bruno settled in her arms.

"How is it going with the lady?" Caine broke the silence first.

I shrugged. Sailor was hard to read. She kept herself reserved. Almost as if she hid her feelings her entire life and didn't know how to open up.

"Diego, I need you to keep tabs on what Sailor's doing. Monitor everything she does on her phone and on the laptop. I want to make sure she cannot be traced. Keep her IP constantly changing, in case someone is attempting to track her down."

I didn’t trust her parents at all. And I suspected Sailor might still be chasing her leads, adamant to put men like me behind bars. She wasn’t the type to give-up. The stubbornness lingered in those blue eyes and was set in her chin.

Diego nodded. “Nico has her IP address hidden so nobody can trace it.”

“Good.”

I turned to Caine. “I need you to dig more into Mr. and Mrs. McHale,” I told him. “There is something that nobody knows. Something that Sailor is scared of and I need to know what.”

Caine’s brow was furrowed and the way he looked at me, I could tell he had something on his mind.

“Spit it out, Caine.”

“Don’t you think you should tell the girl about the contract between her father and yours? The Belles and Mobsters agreement.”

It crossed my mind, but how in the fuck did one broach that subject? It was clear Sailor wasn’t close to her parents, but she loved her sister. To break news like that would shatter anyone.

I shook my head. It wasn’t the right time to tell her. She and her sister were close. Sailor gave everything up and adopted Gabriel. It would be cruel to tell her that Anya was given to my father to impregnate and then break her in as a whore.

“Does she remember you?” Diego’s voice was low and nobody could hear us, but I wished we were having this conversation in a more private location.

“No.”

“Don’t take this the wrong way,” Caine muttered. “You don’t exactly have a face that a woman forgets. I’ve witnessed it enough times.” Diego snickered. “All I’m saying is that it’s odd.”

“I agree,” Diego chimed in. “It’s extremely strange she doesn’t remember you. After all, you killed a man for her.”

An idea popped in my head. “Secure men to meet us in Miami. I’m going to take Sailor on a date.”

Both of their blank stares met my gaze. I couldn’t blame them. I didn’t really date. Yes, I fucked women but there was no room for dating and relationships in my line of work. And a blonde young woman from eight years ago always lurking in the corner of my mind didn’t help.

“Date?” Caine finally asked. “Like what kind?”

“I’ll take her to the fundraiser we are hosting for the Mayor at La Reina.”

“Will she agree?” Diego questioned. “First marriage and now a date.”

I had to fight the urge not to bark out at him and beat his face against the table.

“Make it happen, Diego,” I ordered, then got up and left the room, aware of their eyes on my back.

I knocked on the door of Sailor’s room and after lots of commotion, the door finally opened. To reveal Gabriel.

“Hey, buddy,” I greeted him. “Is your mom ready?”

He glanced over his shoulder and then rolled his eyes. “She’s not happy about the dress.”

“She didn’t like it?”

I had the dress specially flown in from Colombia. The light blue gown with a flared bottom had the same kind of pink roses all over it - from light pink to dark pink. It was similar to the dress she wore the night I met her.

“She called it puffy and too much,” Gabriel answered, shrugging.

Sailor came into view and fuck, she looked like a million bucks. Her pale hair was pulled up into a fancy bun and her

cheeks pink.

“Damn straight, it’s too much,” she muttered. “What kind of event is this anyhow? You didn’t say.”

At that moment, a little brown shadow ran straight inside her elaborate skirts. A shared look by the three of us and the next second our laughter filled the room.

Sailor’s eyes twinkled with happiness and that beautiful mouth curved into a smile. I closed the distance between us and lowered down onto one knee.

“Here, let me help you find Bruno.”

“Bruno loves Mom’s dresses,” Gabriel remarked. “He fell asleep on her black dress. You’re lucky, Raphael. Otherwise, she’d have worn that dress.” Then he giggled. “She said it was the perfect funeral dress.”

My gaze held hers, the unapologetic look shining through her ocean blues.

Sailor lifted her dress, and little Bruno got himself all cozy, flopped down on his ass against Sailor’s leg. I caught a glimpse of those beautiful slim calves, taunting me. Fuck, I had to be a sad fucking case if I found her calves sexy.

Then I swore her skirt rose another few inches. My eyes flickered up to find her looking at me, her blue eyes turned a few shades darker.

“Are you getting the puppy or staring at my legs, Raphael?” she said impishly. Gabriel giggled and took off, leaving us alone.

“Both, Reina,” I told her. “I’m a good multitasker.”

That little minx. I scooped up the puppy who was pressed against her leg, and ensured that my knuckles brushed against her skin. Fuck, her skin was soft.

I rose back up to my full height and watched her fingers clutching the dress fabric so hard, her knuckles turned white. I almost expected her to twirl around, but Sailor was too cool for that. And so damn beautiful.

The cut of her dress in the back was low, baring her smooth, pale back, leaving plenty to the imagination. It

dipped just low enough to give you more than just a glimpse of that smooth beautiful skin. To have me imagining what I could do to that ass nestled just underneath the dress's edge.

I ignored the heat running straight to my dick and forced my gaze up her torso. Not many women would be able to pull off a dress like that. But Sailor, she looked like a queen in it.

"You look like my reina," I rasped.

Fuck, she was a queen worth waiting for.

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Chapter Thirty-Two

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SAILOR

Heels clicked against the marble floor.

The club La Reina was turned into a ballroom while upper floors hosted poker tables and roulette tables.

"Do you do this often?" I asked, side-eying Raphael.

"What?"

"Host gambling at the same time as a fundraiser?"

"No, usually it's a nightclub and casino." His gaze roamed over the room. "But for this event, my people didn't organize anything. I let the city host their fundraiser and they have free rein of the building and event today."

A memory flickered in the corner of my mind the moment we arrived, but it was gone before I could zero in on it. It was an important memory, my gut warned, but no matter how hard I tried to recall it, I came up blank.

"What's the matter?" Raphael's gaze focused on me, his men walking right behind us.

I shook my head. "Nothing."

Silver trays full of champagne flutes and appetizers made the rounds across the room. The glasses glinted beneath the large chandelier. A mini orchestra played easy tunes in the corner, and all the while, men in suits and women in extravagant gowns mingled.

Raphael grabbed a glass of champagne from a passing tray and handed it over to me.

"What about you?" I asked.

"I don't drink at these kinds of events," he replied, his gaze taking in a group of men who were approaching us and his hand wrapped around my hip.

He seemed relaxed but it was a disguise. I could feel his tension as if it was my own.

"Is everything okay?" I whispered under my breath, and all the while keeping a smile on my face.

"Just stay close to me."

"Okay." What the hell was going on?

I took a sip of champagne, trying to settle my nerves and watching the men approach us. And that was when I spotted him. Santiago fucking Tijuana. I inched closer to Raphael while fear wrapped around my throat.

He'd know who I was, I had no doubt. Suddenly, two men showed up to my right and Raphael's left. I recognized Diego and Caine, and realized these were his men. Thank God. It meant we were safe. *Right?*

Santiago's eyes roamed over me, taking in my dress and something dark flickered in those black eyes.

"Santos," one of the men greeted Raphael, extending his hand. "Here you are. I started to think maybe you decided not to come."

"Mayor." Raphael took the offered hand and shook it, then unbuttoned his suit jacket, showing his black vest that hugged his flat stomach and the gun holster. I'd bet my life, he did that by design. "It would be rude not to show up at my own club, don't you think?"

The mayor looked tired and worn out. I didn't envy him. Florida had different versions of criminal organizations battling for years. Different day; different criminal. He probably just wanted to survive and keep his family intact.

Unlike some other influential families, like mine, that actually profited from it. My father was a monster, just like

Santiago Tijuana.

“And who do we have here?” Santiago’s heavily accented voice and leering made the back of my arms tingle and not in a good way.

“This is my wife,” Raphael introduced me, lying like the true devil he was. I remained still, praying to God that my expression was blank. Except for the delightful, fake smile. “Sailor, this is Miami’s mayor, Mr. Sanders.”

I tilted my head in acknowledgement.

“Get out of here.” Sanders patted Raphael on the shoulder, the move kind of comical since Raphael was a whole head taller than him. “Congratulations. Welcome to wedded bliss.”

“Or not,” Santiago added, his stare cold and unflinching. Just being in his presence sent disgusting shivers rolling down my spine. Santiago Tijuana was tall, but round, his three hundred pounds making him appear like Bluto, from the Popeye cartoon.

His olive skin, unlike Raphael’s, looked sickly. His slicked-back hair held so much gel that it didn’t move at all. And it glistened like a black obsidian crystal.

His gaze raked over my bare forearms and even took two steps around me to glimpse at my bare back. The guy made me sick.

Raphael pulled me closer to him and Caine took a step closer, blocking his view. Suddenly, I fucking loved Raphael’s men. That man was a million times better than Santiago Tijuana.

“Miss McHale, how are you parents?” Santiago taunted.

“Mrs. Santos,” I corrected, supporting Raphael’s lie, then shrugged. “Fine, I guess.”

The mayor's eyes widened. “Not *the* McHales?”

“Exactly *the* McHales,” Santiago drawled, watching me like a snake. Ready to strike at any moment. I hated the bastard more than I thought possible. “Their political

career rivaled those of the Kennedys. In fact, I thought there were rumors of you connecting with Aaron Kennedy."

I stiffened. "And I heard a rumor of a contract." I feigned a bored expression as I let my eyes roam behind him, as if he wasn't worth my time. "And here we are. I'm married."

Fucker!

"Things change," he gritted, keeping a fake smile, resembling a grimace.

"Oh, I look forward to having you as a Miami resident," the mayor chimed in, oblivious to the tension simmering around us.

"I hear your brother has new followers," Raphael said. "The preferred Tijuana brother."

This earned Raphael a tight smile that didn't reach his eyes, but at least the bastard's attention was no longer on me.

"You stole from me, Santos," Santiago hissed in Spanish. The mayor still stood around with a frozen smile on his face, looking like a discarded puppet. It was exactly what he was, a puppet among the criminals.

"She never belonged to you, cabrón," Raphael responded in English.

Thick tension permeated the air and made it hard to breathe, while my eyes darted between the two criminals. Something dark lurked in Raphael's eyes and it was clear, at least to me, that a single wrong move by Santiago and Raphael would go into killer mode.

Diablo.

My eyes flickered to his hand wrapped around my waist and there it was. The tattoo that I dreamt about sometimes. My temples throbbed as my mind hunted for something. Something important.

It evaporated, just like all of Anya's dreams of freedom before she died.

Forcing a smile to my lips, I turned to look at Raphael. "Ready to make the rounds, dear?"

Raphael's eyes were on Santiago, something dark in his gaze. *Drip, drip, drip.* Yes, Raphael was neck deep covered in blood, but at least he didn't deal in human trafficking or raping innocent women. His father might have, but he didn't.

A corner of Raphael's lips tugged up. "Gentlemen."

His voice held an unspoken threat of retribution and suddenly, I found myself happy to have him on my side.

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Chapter Thirty-Three

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RAPHAEL

One thing I could be certain of.

Sailor didn't remember me nor La Reina. It was as if she never even visited the club. Of course, now I knew that one of the women with her that night was Aurora Ashford.

"I never thought I'd ever see Diablo waiting for his lady in the hallway of the bathrooms," Diego teased.

I didn't give a shit. Her safety was the most important thing to me. Sailor had to use the restroom, and I refused to let her roam this place unprotected even for a second while that fucker Santiago Tijuana was here.

He was getting escorted out. Right about now. And sure as shit, protests and complaints in Spanish shattered the air.

I let out a sardonic breath as I flicked a bored glance in the direction of the noise, just in time to see my two bouncers muscle Santiago down the corridor.

"What the fuck is Sanders doing with Tijuana?" Caine grumbled.

The cell phone in my hand, I started typing a message to Alexei.

"Probably making deals behind my back," I said. "Maybe it's time we remind him who Florida belongs to."

“What are you thinking?” he questioned.

“Do we still have a picture of him fucking his mistress?” Caine nodded. “Let it slip to the press.”

I finished typing in the message to Alexei. ***Check if your woman remembers coming to the club La Reina in Miami eight years ago with Sailor.***

Sailor slipped out of the bathroom and her eyes lit up with a spark of surprise.

“Has the party moved to the hallway?” she asked, amused.

Though something was off. I could see it etched on her face. *Worry.*

“Don’t worry, Reina. The Tijuana scum was escorted out.”

A terse nod, but she didn’t say anything else.

For the next thirty minutes, we made our rounds. It was then that Sailor’s upbringing shone. She was classy and composed, hiding behind a perfect face and a perfect smile. She sat at the table with the mayor's wife, along with a few other Miami socialites. On the surface, she fit right in.

They couldn’t tell the difference between her tense shoulders and her perfect posture, nor her sincere smile from her fake one.

I stood around with the mayor discussing the upcoming political campaign, and he was working hard to get me to sign up for a donation. I decided to let him sweat it out.

Movement from the corner of my eye caught my attention as a glimpse of blue, flowy material fluttered out of sight. Sailor’s gown.

I followed after her down the hallway, sticking to the shadows, interested to see where she was going. She turned left, then right until she spotted a terrace and she stepped outside. Once a distance away, she pressed a phone to her ear, gazing over her shoulder.

“Yeah, I can talk.” Her voice was soft, but the silence was so heavy, allowing her voice to travel over the light

breeze.

“Seriously, you found it?” her voice was hopeful, her slim shoulders tense. “What kind of evidence?” A stretch of silence followed and she breathed out in disbelief. “That’s nothing new. I need something connecting the two of them.”

Another stretch of silence.

“Well, Santiago Tijuana wasn’t supposed to be allowed bail,” she hissed. “The evidence was solid.” Whatever she was being told, she didn’t like it.

She blew out an air of frustration. “No, thank you. It’s the last time I trust the Feds to keep us safe.”

It didn’t surprise me that Sailor was still chasing her story. Yes, it disappointed me, but I expected nothing less from the woman.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” she muttered and my lips tugged upwards. “Those fuckers.” She had a dirty mouth on her. “Do we at least know where to look?”

She pushed her hand through her hair. Whatever it was, she was worried about it. “If they’d left him in fucking jail, we wouldn’t be having this fucking conversation.” Another silence followed and a string of curses. “No, I don’t want to ask my fucking father. You can go fuck yourself.”

She’d get herself in trouble. Caine was a few feet behind me and he gave me a thumbs up. He was able to capture the conversation. Another few words and she hung up.

She started to pace back and forth, murmuring something to herself.

I strode out of the shadows and towards her. Her head whipped around, her eyes widened noticing me. My fingers itched to grab her nape, then punish her senseless with my mouth for continuing to endanger herself.

I slipped my hands into the pockets of my suit. “Having a good time?” I drawled.

Her shoulders slightly tensed, but she forced them lax.

“The best.” Her voice dipped with sarcasm.

“Let’s go home,” I told her.
After all, we had a wedding to prepare for tomorrow.

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Chapter Thirty-Four

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SAILOR

Sunlight shone through the windows of my bedroom. Dust particles danced in the air like tiny flickers of silver and gold. Just like my dress.

“Oh my gosh,” Willow beamed. “The dress is gorgeous. Did you pick it?”

I shook my head while staring at my reflection. My makeup had been done and my hair had been pulled up in a fancy braided bun. A diamond tiara made me feel like a princess. A snow princess. A silver princess.

The wedding dress was a perfect mixture of white and silver, like freshly fallen snow. The thin straps had tiny diamond beads that matched the diamonds on the tiara. The bodice had the similar decor, hugging my torso while the sheer material of it flared down to the hardwood floor into a long flared train behind me.

It was simply beautiful. Breathtaking.

“It suits you perfectly,” Aurora chimed in as she tugged the last of my laces on my back. “You’re glowing.”

“I’m nervous,” I admitted.

“Well, if you want to run, I'll hijack the plane.” Royce’s voice came from behind me and I whirled around to find all three Ashford brothers here.

I smiled.

“You guys came?” I beamed.

“Of course,” Royce answered. “We’d never miss it.”

Gabriel came right behind them, looking handsome. “Oh my gosh,” I murmured softly. “You look so handsome, buddy.”

He adjusted his tie, and pulled each sleeve, the movement smooth. I had never seen Raphael make such a gesture but it reminded me of him.

“My suit matches Raphael’s. He said I look like him,” my son announced proudly. And he was right. He looked like Raphael.

“Do you have the rings?” I asked, smiling at his enthusiasm. Gabriel was the ring bearer and he took the responsibility seriously.

He pulled them out of his pocket. “All safe.”

My eyes traveled over the people in the room and realized this was the first time since we buried Anya that all of us stood in the same room. If only she was–

“Anya’s here with us,” Royce said, his voice low.

“Watching from heaven?” Gabriel asked.

I pulled him into a tight hug. “Yes, buddy. She’s always watching over us from heaven.”

“And from her mountain.”

I blinked, trying hard not to spill any tears. “Because she loves you so much,” I whispered.

“And you,” he added.

I nodded, unable to say anything. Emotions suffocated and my heart squeezed. But for the first time in forever, a promise of a better future was stronger than anything else.

“Do you Sailor Brooke McHale take Raphael Matteo Santos to be your lawfully wedded husband, to live together in matrimony, to love him, comfort him, honor and keep him,

in sickness and in health, in sorrow and in joy, to have and to hold, from this day forward, as long as you both shall live?”

A very long second passed. My heart raced. My chest rose and fell. I worried I’d pass out.

Too fast.

It was all happening too damn fast. Every word, every step towards this charade was uncertain on my part. Yet, it felt right. Safe. That part worried me even more. I knew there were good men and bad men in this world. The Ashford brothers were good men.

Mobsters were bad. Except that I ran into a few now that had some standards. A better moral compass than my own parents that destroyed a child's innocence. My sister’s. Mine. Even Gabriel’s if they were given a chance. I’d never allow it.

“I do.” Some girls dream of marrying a prince while I dreamt of a devil. I never imagined I’d actually marry one.

But I knew deep down, this was the right move. For my son and me. This diablo has come to save us from those threatening us. But the question was how will I save myself from him? With each passing day, I fell further and further under his spell.

This devil would protect Gabriel. Raphael might be a lot of things, but he protected innocents. Just like Nico Morrelli.

“You’re now husband and wife,” the priest proclaimed.

Raphael took a step forward and his arm wrapped around my waist, pulling me against his hard body. My body shuddered in anticipation. My breath slowed, everything faded and I held his gaze as he inched closer and closer. He took my chin between his fingers and tilted my jaw up. Blue flames in his gaze rattled something deep inside me, and I feared my deal with the devil might be my undoing.

It wasn’t smart to feel all these confusing emotions. Not towards this man.

Another inch. I held my breath, my heart thundering hard against my chest. Our mouths connected and all thoughts evaporated when his mouth connected with mine. Hot. Exhilarating. It stole my breath. My lips parted and his tongue slid into my mouth. He tasted even better than he smelled. Like the most delicious bourbon. My eyes fluttered shut. I forgot where we were. I forgot the reason we were doing this. I forgot about the threats lurking after my son and me.

Everything faded and left me just feeling. This man could kiss. It was the hottest, hands down the best kiss ever. It was the most thrilling feeling I’d ever experienced. My palms pressed against his chest, the heat of him seeping into me. He had my undivided attention.

God, he was all muscle and I couldn’t even imagine how good it would feel to have his body cover mine. Eagerly, my body pressed against his hard chest, his mouth on mine and the ache pulsed between my thighs.

Throbbing. Demanding.

This man could ruin me if I let him. And I got the distinct feeling that I was already headed in that direction.

The sound of applause pierced through the haze in my brain.

Taking an unsteady step back, I pushed gently against his chest and blinked. I had forgotten we had an audience.

His gaze still lingered on my lips, the intensity in his eyes had my heart racing. A possessive heat sizzled in his blue eyes and my blood burned in response. My body shifted forward, like a magnet to a steel.

When you feel the need for sex, you come to me.

God, I felt the need for sex. Right now.

Would it be too much if we dumped the guests and I just dragged him to his room? Fuck, I didn’t know where his room was. Okay, my room.

“Yay,” Gabriel’s squeal brought me down from my sex crazed heights. “Does that make him my dad?”

Raphael and I both winced at the same time, then shared a glance.

“I’m not ready for that,” I muttered, shaking my head. There was no sane way to explain this family tree to a seven year old.

“Thank you for being my ring bearer,” Raphael answered instead. “And for helping me choose the right ring. Couldn’t have done it without you.”

Gabriel beamed like a hundred watt bulb, his grin stretching from ear-to-ear.

From the corner of my eye, I caught a glimpse of my best friends. “Oh, look,” I exclaimed, aiming to distract Gabriel. “Aunt Aurora and Willow want you.”

It worked because his head whipped around and without another look our way, his face lit up and he bolted their way.

“We’re going to have to tell him, Reina.” Raphael’s voice was smooth velvet. I had no idea why he kept calling me reina, but I secretly loved it. Though I'd be a pissed off reina if he called every woman that. I might get a complex and I’d insist he called me by my first name when we have sex.

I froze at that thought. Had I already decided we’d have sex? No, I couldn’t be that reckless. Except I thought *when* not *if* we’d have sex.

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Chapter Thirty-Five

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RAPHAEL

Sailor's body stiffened next to me while I fought the urge to drag my bride up to my bedroom and indulge myself in her body. She looked beautiful in her wedding dress. Silvery and white. She looked exquisite. Her blonde hair was in a braided bun, sunrays giving her a halo look, and she barely had any make-up on. And still, she was the most beautiful woman I had seen.

Her mouth was swollen from my kiss and she had the look of a woman who had been freshly fucked. And damn if it didn't make my cock rock-hard the way her body felt in my arms. Pliant and soft.

Yet, right now she watched me with disdain. As if she was horrified with herself. It was enough to sour my mood. It annoyed the hell out of me that I even cared.

"I'll decide what to tell Gabriel," she gritted through clenched teeth. "And when."

And fuck, if that didn't piss me off. Yes, he was her son, well technically nephew, but he was my brother too. He had the right to know that we were related and the longer we waited, the harder it would be.

"Let's go." My voice was cold and unnaturally calm. The change in her demeanor was evident. At least to me.

We left the back of the house that faced the sunset and headed for the formal dining room. We walked in silence, her smile slightly reserved as we walked past our guests that consisted of our closest friends. Gabriel, Caine, Luciano with his wife, Cassio and Nico with their significant others, the Nikolaev men, my sister, and Aurora's best friends.

And of course, one trusted reporter who would publish an article tomorrow so both her family and the Tijuanas understood if they hurt her, they'd earn my wrath.

Once in the hallway, I could sense her relaxing with each step towards the dining room where we'd have a celebratory dinner. The room was decorated with candles and flowers. Subtle and tastefully done. Nothing about it was over-the-top, and I could tell by the look on Sailor's face that she was pleasantly surprised.

"This is nice," she murmured.

"What did you expect? Piñatas?"

Her eyes narrowed on me. "No, not piñatas." Then attempted to jerk her arm out of my grip. Unsuccessfully. "You don't have to be such a jerk," she hissed in a low voice.

She was right. Of course, she was, but it rubbed me the wrong way that she acted like that fucking kiss didn't set off fireworks.

Once at the head of the table, I pulled out the chair for her and she silently sat down. Once seated she turned her attention to her friends seated to the left of her. The rest of the guests filled the room while Caine sat to my right.

He glanced at Sailor, scanning her with an appreciative gaze and jealousy filled me. Goddamn it, what the fuck was going on with me around this woman?

"You look beautiful," he praised. "The most beautiful bride I have ever seen."

She smiled softly, her cheeks flushing slightly. Fucking great, now I was ready to kill my most trusted man.

“Caine,” I growled and surprise flashed on his face. I was never the jealous and possessive type.

He raised his hands up, as if surrendering. “No worries, boss. She’s married. I don’t mess around with married women.”

Sailor scoffed, rolling her eyes and then turned to talk to her friend while Caine updated me on the security.

“One attempted breach.”

A low growl vibrated in my chest. “Who?”

From the moment I was forced back into our family business, I had Caine run detailed checks on everyone that worked for me. The men and women that set foot on my island underwent extra background checks along with their families - from the cook to the maid and every guard.

He gave me a pointed look and nothing additional was needed. *Beatrice.*

My fist clenched so tight that my fingers started cramping. “Where?” The word was barely recognizable as I gritted it through my teeth.

Caine glanced beside me, then answered in a low voice, “She tried to swim over from a boat.”

“What boat?” Beatrice didn’t have a boat.

“A new boyfriend. We’re digging up information on him. Apparently, she convinced him to drive over here.”

“So there is a stranger that knows this island’s location?” I growled.

Caine’s eyes flickered past me, then returned to me. “We followed them back to Miami. They docked in Sunset Harbor Yacht Club. But both disappeared.”

“Have them keep looking,” I gritted. “Did you sink the boat?”

A terse confirmation nod.

I was an idiot to give Beatrice a chance. She had a rough childhood and I thought she deserved a break. Fucking wrong. It took all my self-control not to shoot up to my feet and go hunt her down. Teach that fucking bitch a lesson.

“Ensure that the article is published tomorrow,” I told him, switching subjects. “It’s imperative it’s in the D.C. paper as well as all our local papers.”

From the corner of my eyes, I caught Sailor stiffen again and annoyance flared inside me.

“Why are we putting it in the papers?” she questioned. I’d have to make sure to keep my conversations private. After all, I wouldn’t want my wife to publish an article about my business.

“So there’s no mistake whose wrath they’ll have to endure if they touch a single hair on your or Gabriel’s head.”

She tilted her head as if she was considering my words. It wouldn’t matter whether she agreed or not. I’d do what was needed to keep her and Gabriel protected. No matter what.

During our dinner, I continued to watch her. She and her friends threw around some jokes, Gabriel right in the midst of it all, and the four of them would throw their heads back and laugh. Alexei lurked around his wife, as if we were in the middle of a battlefield, adamant not to let her out of his sight.

After dinner, the backyard was open for dancing. Considering this was put together in a matter of days, the wedding planner outdid himself. The whole backyard was lit, the breeze swept from the ocean, and the atmosphere was relaxed. Although the music was slightly questionable. Some rap music blasted through the speakers and the three girls danced like it was going out of style.

This time I stood with Nico, Cassio, Vasili, and Alexei on the furthest end of the makeshift dance floor. My wife and her friends whispered among each other. Whatever they were discussing had Aurora and Willow confused. The three of them glanced at us, frowned and then continued whispering amongst each other.

I met Alexei's arctic eyes on me. "I talked to Aurora about her girls' night at La Reina eight years ago," he deadpanned. I waited, sensing his next words wouldn't be something I liked. "Anya, Sailor's sister, had an invite from your old man. The four of them went to his house after clubbing. When nobody opened the door, they snuck in and went skinny dipping in the pool."

"Fuck," I muttered, rage bitter on my tongue. No woman should be around my father, never mind young girls. I should have killed my father a long time ago.

"Your father showed up and dragged them all in. He raped Anya with the girls in the room."

Fury, red and violent, swept through me. It demanded vengeance.

"It impacted Sailor the worst," Alexei continued. "It fucked up her memory. Aurora said it was the only thing she remembered from that spring break"

"Did he touch them?" I gritted. If he had touched Sailor, I'd dig out his bones and burn them.

Alexei shook his head. "Just Anya."

I let relief wash over me, soothing out the burning rage. Today wasn't the day to be pissed off and the last thing I wanted was to scare my wife.

My wife. The two words that sounded fucking perfect.

Nico's, Cassio's, and Vasili's wives stood a few feet apart from us. The little ones ran around wild and carefree, so unlike our own childhoods. It was a promise of a new and better generation.

"Well, you're the last one," Cassio slapped me on my back.

I raised my eyebrow. "As far as I know, there are two others still not married." Sasha and Luca were the last ones. A silvery laugh peeled through the air, drawing my eyes towards the source.

My gaze darkened seeing who she was dancing with. *Sasha Nikolaev.*

“Though he might be dead before he has a chance to step in front of a priest.”

The fucker was a smooth dancer, and I fucking hated seeing his hands on my wife.

“If you're going to kill him, give me a heads up,” Alexei said in his cold, monotone voice. “I’ll remove Aurora from that area.”

“I noticed she’s not drinking,” I remarked dryly.

He didn’t answer but he didn’t have to. The fucker’s lip twitched, which was the most emotion I had ever seen on his face.

Sailor must have felt me staring, because she glanced my way.

“Excuse me, gentlemen.”

“Fuck, don’t kill him,” Vasili grumbled. “Isabella won’t be happy about it. He’s babysitting for us this weekend.”

Setting my glass on a nearby table, I headed straight for my wife.

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Chapter Thirty-Six

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SAILOR

The champagne was getting to me, setting my insides aflame. Or maybe it was the glances my new husband sent my way. They were like a warm caress on my skin and felt better than the light ocean breeze against my skin.

Throughout the whole dinner, I was aware of his eyes full of promises and for the first time ever, it didn't send fearful shivers down my spine. And that scared me more than anything.

"What's the matter?" Aurora asked, leaning closer to me as her arm looped through mine. Willow mimicked the movement on my other side. The three of us walked together towards the dancing area.

"Are you looking forward to having him screw your brains out?" Willow remarked, her eyes twinkling with amusement.

I stiffened slightly. It wasn't exactly that I was inexperienced, but I'd never gone all the way.

It was the reason my on-again, off-again relationship with Aaron worked. He never pressured me, and I let Aurora and Willow believe that I was sexually active, when in truth, it freaked me out whenever Aaron touched me. Since he preferred not to touch me, it worked perfectly.

Except, how do you explain that to your best friends? Hey, I'm a twenty-five-year-old virgin because the thought of going all the way was a mindfuck of epic proportions. Oh and by the way, my father had been raping my older sister for as long as I could remember.

And I hadn’t done anything to protect her. Goddamn it!

“Sailor, what is it?” Aurora tugged on my arm.

I sighed. “I’m worried about later.”

They both blinked, staring at me with a confused expression.

“Later?” Willow questioned.

“Yeah, if he tries to sleep with me,” I grumbled. Really, did she need everything spelled out?

Both their eyes darted in the direction of my new husband, then back to me. “You mean because he’s so hot?” She waved her hand and before I had a chance to comment, she continued, “Don’t worry. You’re hot too. So two fires just make it hotter.”

I couldn’t help rolling my eyes.

“I’m worried because I haven’t gone all the way before,” I hissed in a low tone. My agitation must have been evident on my face because my husband and his friends kept their curious gazes on us.

Aurora let out a sardonic breath. “What do you mean? You and Aaron have been dating on and off for ages.”

I wanted to pull my hair in frustration, but it’d ruin my hair style. “We. Never. Went. All. The. Way.” Frustration flickered in my chest and my cheeks went hot with it. “I don’t know how much clearer I can be.”

The words tumbled from my mouth and with the admission, relief came. Willow was the most sexual out of the three of us and sometimes it was exhausting to pretend.

Yet, as they both stared at me right now, I wondered if maybe I should have just kept the words to myself. My cheeks must be stained crimson by now and suddenly my

beautiful silver white wedding dress felt so damn heavy, I was tempted to take it off.

"Jesus Christ, you should tell him," Aurora whispered. "How did we not pick up on it? And I'm a damn FBI profiler."

"No, no, you shouldn't tell him," Willow protested, then turned to look at Aurora. "I guess you're not that great at profiling. After all, that man you're dating is psychotic. Even now, I can feel him staring us down, ready to attack."

Aurora's eyes darted to Alexei again and she smiled softly, then returned her attention to us. "He's the best psychopath and he's mine. Don't be jealous you can't find one, Willow."

I groaned softly. "You two drive me nuts sometimes."

"But you love us," they both sang in unison. It was so good to see Aurora happy. She and Alexei just recently got together and she glowed. Of course, it could be her pregnancy too. Although the gazes those two shared frequently told me it was probably a combination of both.

"I do love you," I admitted.

"Okay, about the virginity predicament," Willow interrupted. "He'll love your virgin pussy, but if you tell him you're a virgin, he might be hesitant to just do it right. I remember how awkward it was for me with the first guy."

Aurora rolled her eyes. "He should know so he doesn't ravish her." The three of us shot glances towards Raphael who stood with Vasili, Nico, Cassio and a few others. Their gazes were trained on us.

"I don't know, ravishing sounds kind of thrilling," Willow snickered.

"I'll just pretend I'm experienced," I grumbled. "You two are of no help."

"He'll know," Aurora protested. "You shouldn't pretend."

I waved my hand. She was probably right, but I was done talking about it.

“Hey, you three.” Sasha showed up out of nowhere, his sister-in-law Isabella by his side. Isabella Nikolaev was Raphael’s half-sister. Small world, huh? “What are you three talking about?” he asked curiously.

“Nothing,” the three of us answered.

Isabella chuckled softly. “Oh, now I am curious too.”

Willow shrugged her shoulders. “We were just saying how annoying stalkers are.”

Sasha’s eyes narrowed on her. “I’m not your goddamn stalker, Willow. Raphael hired me to keep you safe.”

Willow waved her hand. “Whatever, stalker. You fucking scared my date away.”

Aurora and I shared a fleeting glance. “Who was the date?” I asked curiously.

“Some Ryan Gosling look alike,” Sasha clarified, grinning like Lucifer.

“It *was* Ryan Gosling, moron. It was a business date.”

Sasha lifted his shoulder. “Looked like a horrible version of him, and Ryan Gosling wasn’t that hot to start with.”

Aurora cocked her eyebrow. “I didn’t know you were an expert on the levels of men’s hotness, Sasha.”

That same shark grin he had when he interrupted our dinner back in New Orleans spread on his face. The guy was good looking if you stared at him long enough, but scary as hell. If I thought Raphael was the devil, Sasha was Satan.

“I have many skills,” Sasha drawled. “Dancing is one of them.” His eyes locked on me. “Can the new bride spare me a dance?”

I lifted my shoulder. “I guess, if you really insist. Just so you’ll stop annoying Willow.”

And off to the dance floor we went. Despite his big frame, Sasha was a good dancer. Excellent in fact.

“You know how to bring the heat, don’t you?” I joked.

“Not as much as you, apparently,” he retorted coolly. “Not even I managed to piss off an entire cartel.”

“Not sure if I’d call that an accomplishment,” I muttered.

“You totally should.” Then he leaned closer. “We fucking hate any organization that traffics women and you, Sailor Santos, brought one down singlehandedly. Not a single person in this room achieved that alone.” Two heartbeats passed before he continued, “You are a badass woman.”

I threw my head back and laughed. “I am many things, Sasha Nikolaev, but a badass woman is not one of them.”

The smile he gave me was sincere. “We’ll have to agree to disagree then.”

His gaze flickered above my head.

“Your new husband is headed straight for us,” Sasha announced, the look in his eyes slightly devious. “He’s not looking so happy.”

Then as if he needed to agitate Raphael more, his hands lowered to my waist, then snaked behind me and his head lowered down, inching closer to my lips. I rolled my eyes, but before I had a chance to grab his hands and place them back up, I sensed Raphael behind me.

“Remove your hands from my wife,” Raphael gritted. “If I have to remove them, you won’t have any left.”

Sasha just grinned. “I was just getting acquainted with the beautiful girl. We ran into each other in New Orleans. If only I could have snatched her before the big, bad Colombian appeared.”

“Stop agitating him,” I scolded Sasha. “The Colombian might kick your Russian ass.”

“This Colombian *will* kick his ass,” Raphael gritted.

Sasha shrugged his shoulders. “Bring it on. It’d be a good workout. I had to skip one this morning, rushing to your wedding.”

Yeah, mobsters swarmed my wedding. Oddly, I liked them all. Raphael, the most. Much to my dismay, because with each passing hour, I was aware, it’d be harder and harder to resist him.

“Reina, I have something to show you.” Raphael’s voice was tainted with something dangerous, giving me a hint of the ruthless man that lurked underneath all that polished exterior.

My brows knitted in confusion. “What?”

“My bedroom.” My lips curved into a slightly dumb smile. Okay, maybe the champagne was a bad idea. I rarely drank and it seemed to have gone straight to my head.

“We’ll keep an eye on Gabriel,” Willow assured. “Go check out your husband’s bedroom.”

The last sentence she almost shouted and my cheeks turned crimson. I glared at her, wanting to kill her with my stare, but before my killer look could even faze her, Raphael picked me up in one swift move and threw me over his shoulder.

A squeal escaped me and then he fucking slapped me on my ass. In front of all of our guests.

Chuckles. Giggles. And I just about died of mortification.

“Put me down, you brute,” I kicked and screeched. Another slap. “What the fuck, Raphael? That hurt.”

“It’s supposed to.” I sensed his control was reigned in tightly. “Next time I find another man’s hands on you, I’ll have them removed.” Then he smacked my ass again, and added, “Permanently.”

“Slightly overboard,” I muttered.

“Are you and Mom going on a honeymoon now?” Gabriel’s voice was near and I lifted my head, but I couldn’t see him. Raphael’s broad back blocked the view.

“Soon, buddy,” Raphael answered. “That puts you in charge of our guests. Can I count on you?”

“Yes. Yes. Of course, yes.” I didn’t have to see Gabriel’s face to know he was smiling. I could hear it in his voice.

“Thank you, Gabriel. Now Mom and I are going to pack.” I snorted, the sound escaping me before I realized. A light smack on my ass. In front of my son! I let out an

undignified gasp. “We might be back before we leave. If we have time.”

Since I was hanging upside down, over his back, I reached down and pinched his ass. Hard. He didn’t even flinch. And Jesus, his ass was all muscle. Kind of nice.

Slap. Ugh.

We strode through his big house and down the unfamiliar hallway, then down through a large door. The door firmly shut behind us and my body slid down his, leaving me face-to-face with him.

He whirled me around then pressed his hard body against my back. Even in this position, I could feel his muscles against my spine. But it wasn’t that which set me on fire. It was his hard erection pushing against the small of my back, massive and ready for me. My breathing labored, coming out fast and choppy with my heated cheek pressed against the wall.

He tangled up his fingers in my hair, grabbing a handful and pushing it to the side, baring my neck to him. His other hand wrapped around my nape, holding me in a steel-like hold before I felt his mouth on my sensitive skin.

It was just a brush of his lips against my skin and yet, my entire body shuddered from that small touch, and my moan vibrated against the walls. His teeth grazed my earlobe and he bit down. Raphael’s cologne strong, musky and potent. *All male*.

His grip was firm, holding me hostage and something about being at his full mercy felt right. Safe.

He licked my earlobe, nibbling and tracing it with his tongue.

“I’m going to fuck you without a condom,” he whispered against my ear, sending shivers down my spine. “Then afterwards, I’m going to keep your panties and we’re going to go back to our guests. I want to watch you talk to them, knowing my cum is dripping down your thighs.”

Jesus, why did that make me hot? It shouldn't. If anyone else had said those words to me, I'd fight them and run. Yet, with him, I wanted to hear more.

His grip on my wrists tightened. "Understood, Reina?"

My eyes grew half-lidded from the pressure of his body against mine. From his deep, raspy voice and his hot breath against my ear. This man was *addictive*. He felt right.

I ground my butt against him and a groan vibrated through his chest straight to my core.

"Understood," I breathed.

One word. It was all it took to set the world on fire. His hand wrapped around my throat, his thumb grazing my pulse and then pushing down on it. I should be terrified of this but I wasn't. Not with Raphael.

And like an addict, I pressed my neck harder into his grip.

"All I can think about is fucking you." His voice was raspy, his chokehold slightly tighter. "Your scent. Your laugh."

"Ditto." He stilled, as if I surprised him. What was happening to me? The devil was tempting me with his words and his hands, and like a sinner I fell under his spell. "Please, will you fuck me? I can't wait-"

The words drifted away as his teeth nipped at my neck. This lust for him was flowing through my veins. Each breath enhanced this desire and there was no going back. He lapped his tongue over the shell of my ear and then bit. *Hard.*

God, this was heaven and hell. Too much and not enough. Maybe I should warn him that I had never gone all the way.

"I'll tell you when I fuck you," he growled. "Not the other way around."

I rolled my eyes, though my insides were lit up with languid heat. "So bossy," I complained, my voice too throaty and needy.

“Open your legs.”

Like a pleasure starved woman, I eagerly obeyed his command. As long as he touched my pussy, I’d do anything. *Within limits*, I lied to myself.

While one hand held my nape, his other reached under my dress and my head fell back to rest on his shoulder the moment he cupped my needy, hot core. I wished my panties were gone.

“Fuck” he groaned. “You’re ready for me.”

One swift move and the sound of tearing filled the room. I got my wish, my panties were gone. It should have terrified me. It didn’t.

I had never felt more alive than when this man touched me. My nerves pulsed with excitement at hearing the arousal in his voice and feeling his hand on my bare pussy.

I ground my ass against his hard erection. “And you’re ready for me,” I moaned.

He slid his fingers against my wet folds, spreading the wetness and making me more sensitive all over. I had lost my mind and I blamed this man for it. All his sharp edges, his suave and charismatic nature made a wanton woman out of me. It was thrilling and I wanted more of him. The moment his finger thrust deep inside me, I lifted on my tiptoes, stifling a whimper.

“Always aiming for the last word,” he rasped, driving his finger even deeper. “Maybe you need to choke on my cock so I can teach you a lesson.”

Another moan. Every cell of me was on fire.

Any kind of comeback evaporated into thin air as he thrust an additional finger into me, his hold on my nape tightening further. The sensation overwhelmed me as he slid his fingers in and out of me, hard and deep.

“No more words,” he said hoarsely as he drove his fingers into me. Coiled pleasure built higher and higher with each savage thrust until all I could feel was the imminent orgasm.

“Fuck, you’re tight,” he grunted. I rolled my hips, meeting each thrust of his fingers. His mouth burned my neck, his teeth grazed my skin, marking me until my entire body was on fire. The pressure built and built until sparks exploded and waves slammed into me, making me see stars behind my eyelids.

Raphael’s fingers continued driving into me, prolonging my orgasm. It was unlike anything I had ever felt before, shattering me into pieces only to put me back together.

“Open those beautiful eyes, Reina,” he demanded in a dark voice. He gripped me by the nape, then swung me around to face him.

My eyes, half-lidded and hazy, met his and something soft and dark lurked in his gaze. I basked in a languid sensation that pulled on my muscles and couldn’t resist pressing my lips to his. His grip on my nape tightened and he kissed me hard and deep.

Resting my hands on his chest, his heart thundered hard and strong. Breaking our kiss, I trailed my lips over his stubble and down his neck.

I skimmed my mouth over his neck, tasting his skin. I dropped down to my knees and heat flared in his eyes. I stared up at him and the deep hunger in his eyes matched the one I felt in the pit of my stomach.

Anticipation danced down my spine along with uncertainty. I wasn’t as experienced as I let on and I didn’t want to disappoint him. As ridiculous as that sounded. I worked his belt open and the metal clang of it sent my pulse into overdrive. The moment his pants were undone, I wrapped my hand around his hard length. He was smooth and warm, hard and thick. My mouth watered, my need urging me to taste him.

Leaning forward, I licked him from base to tip and his groan filled the air. He grabbed a fistful of my hair as if he worried I’d stop. I licked him again, keeping my eyes on his face. Another groan escaped him and it sent a hum of

satisfaction through me. My thighs clenched together and the aching pulse between my legs intensified.

I ran my tongue around the head of his cock before sucking it into my mouth. His head fell back with a grunted, “Fuck.”

I sucked him again, deeper and gliding up and down. His pre-cum tasted salty and musky. I loved it, inhaling it deep into my lungs

His hand on my hair shifted to the side and he moved my head, controlling the rhythm. Up and down, deeper and harder. My eyes fluttered closed, and I moaned around his shaft. He was thrusting in, hard and untamed. And I let him use my mouth for his own pleasure.

“Look at me,” he ordered roughly and my gaze flicked up, eager to please him.

He pushed himself deeper into my mouth, hitting the back of my throat. I took more of him inside, hollowing my cheeks. Using his hold on my hair, he pushed his cock deeper and I relaxed my throat to allow him to deep-throat me. His grunts spurred me on, making me eager to make him lose control. His lids dropped and his rhythm slowed but I kept sucking him eagerly. I basked in the sounds of his pleasure, those low grunts and deep groans. It enhanced my own excitement and turned me on.

His breaths came out heavy and he watched me with a half-lidded heavy gaze. I eagerly bobbed my head and with a groan, he pulled me away from him.

I blinked in confusion, then wiped my mouth with the back of my hand. “What’s the matter?”

“Our first time, I’m gonna spill in your pussy, not your pretty, smart mouth, Reina.”

I flushed, his words setting me aflame and I bit my lip to stop a moan from escaping me.

“Clothes. Off. Now.”

I scrambled to my feet, then slipped my dress off. His big hands skimmed over my skin, the touch possessive.

Nobody could say that Raphael Santos didn't go after what he wanted. The way his gaze traveled over me made me feel like the most beautiful woman in the world.

His palm skimmed over my neck, down my chest and lingered over my breast. He grabbed a nipple in his fingers, squeezed it and then twisted it. Then his mouth latched onto my breast and a flame shot through my bloodstream. The way he touched me was hungry and urgent, rough and consuming, feeding my own fire.

Both of my hands came up and buried in his hair as he sucked and nipped every inch of my neck.

"Get on the bed," he ordered and I scrambled to obey as he discarded his own clothes. I couldn't help but keep my eyes glued to him, hungry to see every inch of him. And I wasn't disappointed.

Good God, every single inch of this man was gorgeous. Perfect. I thought I'd combust just from watching him. He hadn't even fucked me yet and I was already falling at his feet.

A thought pierced through my lust-fused brain.

I should tell him. Yes, so far panic hadn't set in, but usually it was the actual act that made me go into a panic attack.

"Raphael," I rasped, shudders rolling down my spine. "I-I have to tell you something."

His rock-hard cock pulsed, straining for me but he instantly stilled.

"Did I hurt you?"

It was those four little words that changed everything for me.

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Chapter Thirty-Seven

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RAPHAEL

"Did I hurt you?"

If I had, I'd fucking cut my dick off. Touching her felt so good, I lost my head. I got so drunk off her scent that I let my hunger for her overwhelm all my senses.

"Sailor, did I hurt you?" I repeated, the unfamiliar worry and regret inching its way into my heart.

She shook her head, but something was worrying her. She bit her lower lip, her eyes looking anywhere but me. *Fuck.*

I reached for my boxers, but her next word froze me. "Umm, I've never done this before."

My hand still on the boxers, I was certain I misunderstood. I straightened up, everything forgotten but the woman sitting next to me. She looked like a goddess from a renaissance painting. Her long, silvery blonde hair cascaded down her shoulders, her light blue eyes locked on me as she continued nibbling on her lower lip.

"I didn't hear that right," I grunted, my dick still hard. I couldn't possibly have understood her right. Sailor was gorgeous. There wasn't a single man that could resist a woman like that.

"Umm-" She pushed her hands through her hair, then met my gaze. Her cheeks were still flushed from the

orgasm she just experienced.

“Don’t laugh,” she warned, her eyes flashing with annoyance. “If you do, I swear, Raphael, I’ll kill you.”

“I won’t laugh,” I promised. There’d be no way I understood her right. Diablo didn’t get that lucky.

I watched the delicate lines of her neck bob as she swallowed, then her shoulders straightened as if she needed courage to say the next words.

“I never went all the way before,” she sighed. “Aaron and I were more platonic than anything. We tried, but I…” She cleared her throat, then took a deep breath and exhaled. “I freaked out or something.”

¡Santa Madre De Dios!

My blood rushed to my head. Fucking both of them. My dick twitched eager to feel her pussy around me. Those words were like a siren’s song to my dick.

“You’re a virgin?” I repeated, just to make sure I understood her right.

“Yes.”

My hands wrapped around her tiny waist and I gently pushed her back against the mattress. Her skin appeared paler against me, her hair even whiter against my skin. Her lightness to my darkness. An angel and a devil.

I didn’t give a fuck. I would kill anyone that touched her or tried to take her away from me.

“Mi amor,” I murmured softly. She blushed; which told me she understood my words in Colombian.

My finger lightly traced the outline of her soft lips, parting them. Her tongue brushed against it, and my cock was ready for her pussy. It has been ready for her from the moment I spotted her. Her fingers curled around my biceps, her wedding ring a smaller version of mine. Black onyx. I thought she’d opt for diamonds but not this woman. When I asked her what kind of ring and stone she wanted. Her answer was, “The one that matches yours.”

Our union started in an unconventional way but I'd keep her safe. I'd make her happy. I'd fucking love her until my last breath and even in my death, I was sure my black soul would search for her.

"I'll go slow," I murmured my promise, slowly trailing my finger over her soft skin, from her neck, over her breast, ribs, flat stomach to her core. "If it hurts or you're not comfortable at any point, you just say the word."

Her gaze lowered between our bodies. "Won't it be hard to stop?"

"For you, no." Fuck, it would be, but I'd rather suffer a thousand deaths than see fear in her eyes or hurt her. "I'll stop whenever you need me to."

"Okay," she breathed.

My finger circled her clit and her eyelids fluttered shut, her body responding in shivers as I slowly slid my finger inside her. She was soaking wet. Her sweet moan filled the room, the sound was one of the most beautiful melodies I'd ever heard.

"Open your eyes, Reina," I demanded. Her eyes flashed to meet my gaze. "I want you to look at your diablo as I make you come."

Our gazes locked, a blazing desire in her crystal pools that matched my own burning in my soul. I'd wanted to steal her soul, her heart. But the angel tricked me. She stole mine instead. She became my heaven. My salvation. My everything.

"Please, Raphael," she pleaded and I instantly tensed. "I ache for you," she added, arching her body into my touch and watching me through her lust-filled eyes.

She was fucking perfect.

I pushed my finger into her, her legs parting for me. I watched her teeth bite at her lower lip. I was dying to taste her again. I worked my finger in and out of her and watched her facial expression turn euphoric as her moans

became louder and my name on her lips like a whispered prayer.

Jesus! I could blow my load just watching her like this. Ruining my virgin wife who was slick with desire and tempting her with my darkness and sinful pleasures.

Her scent, her moans ignited this obsession that blazed through my veins, this need to possess her. I pulled my finger out of her wet pussy and a protesting whimper left her lips.

“Don’t stop,” she pleaded.

“I’m not stopping, Reina,” I promised. “I’m doing what I should have done the moment we stepped into our bedroom. Make love to you.”

Her mouth parted and her eyes shimmered like the lightest sapphires, yearning and burning desire mixing in them.

“You made me cum,” she murmured, jerking her hips into my touch. “So you did something right,” she stammered.

I took her nipple into my mouth, my teeth grazing the sensitive bud.

“Oh my God,” she moaned, her fingers pulled through my hair, her nails scraping at my scalp. I bit her nipple and her body arched off the bed, pushing herself against me. “More. Harder.”

I grinned against her soft skin, her breast straining for my touch. My eager angel.

I turned my attention to her other nipple and bit harder, all the while my fingers slid in and out of her. “Ohhh. Raphael, I’m going to–”

Another moan.

Fuck, with all those noises she was making, I wouldn’t last long. The look of ecstasy on her face was a sight to behold. I’d worship her for the rest of my days, just to see that look on her face.

Her inner walls clenched around my fingers and I continued thrusting them in and out, then curling them up to hit the sweet spot inside her.

Her eyes turned a darker shade. Her body started to shudder. My fingers were drenched from her juices. She was ready for me. I slid down her body, kissing her stomach. Lower. Until I reached her pussy and the scent of her arousal was the best fragrance ever.

My tongue slid up her slit. Her slick sweetness was all around me. Tasting my wife was the best dessert ever. And as a delicacy, I devoured her. I nipped at her clit, eating her out as she ground her pussy against my face. I slid my tongue inside her and a keening sound rasped from Sailor's lips. I lapped at her juices, greedy and all the while I kept my eyes on her. Her cheeks were flushed and her hair was like a halo around her.

A devil devouring his angel.

I nipped at her clit again and her body tensed, her fingernails gripped my hair and I felt her body shuddering underneath me.

"Raphael," she whimpered. "Oh my God, I'm–"

I didn't ease up. I kept lapping at her pussy, determined to taste every single drop of her.

She was exquisite. The way she clenched around my finger. The way she moaned my name.

Raising to my haunches, I hovered over her body. "You, Reina, are heaven on my tongue."

I pressed my mouth to hers, letting her taste herself on my lips. "Are you ready?"

Her hands wrapped around my neck, pulling me closer. Our gazes drowned in each other.

"Yes," she rasped, her soft lips brushing against mine.

I placed my dick at her entrance, dipping just the tip of it inside and I felt her pussy clench, greedy for it.

"You want it?" I grunted.

"Yes," she whimpered. "Please, give it to me."

I slid deeper inside her, keeping my eyes on her face. For any trace of panic or signs she needed me to stop while fighting the instinct to thrust deep inside her and fill her to the hilt.

Her legs came around me, locked behind my back. Her back arched, her hot pussy taking me cock even deeper.

“Fuck, Reina.” My control hung by a thread. “You feel so good.” My eyes sought out hers. “Am I hurting you?”

She shook her head. “No,” she breathed. Her grip tightened around me. “I need you inside me.”

“Reina, I don’t want to lose my control.”

Her mouth skimmed down my neck, her nose brushing against my skin. And then she inhaled deeply, like she needed me in her lungs. Just as I needed her in my blood.

“I’ve never made it this far,” she whispered against my neck. “I think I’m good. Don’t hold back.”

I shifted away, just enough to see her face. I needed to see her face, to ensure she meant it. Our eyes met and I saw reassurance in hers. Lust. And the need in them reflected my own.

I thrust all the way in, filling her to the hilt and stilled. Her pussy clenched around me and a shudder rolled down my back.

“Fuck, you’re so big,” she moaned.

“My reina knows exactly how to flatter the devil.” I had to fight the urge to start rutting her like a beast. But she had to get used to me first.

Her lips curved into a smile, her hair sprawled around her like a fan. Like my own personal angel.

“Don’t hold back, Raphael,” she murmured. “I’m ready.”

She arched her back up off of the bed, her channel strangling my cock. My muscles shook with the need to pound into her. Sweat gathered at my brow. She felt so fucking good.

“Give me everything,” she spoke softly in my ear.

And my control snapped. The primal need clawed its way up and like the devil, I let loose. I pulled away, then rammed hard into her. Her loud moan was the best music. My big body pinned her against the mattress, pounding into her and she took it all.

My body on top of hers, supporting myself with my forearms, my hips kept thrusting into her over and over again, while I kept my gaze on her face. Her warm pussy clenched around my cock, welcoming it home.

My ears buzzed and I lost myself to her heaven.

“Mine.” Thrust.

“Always mine.” Thrust.

“Forever.” Thrust.

She screamed my name. I couldn’t tell whether my words came out in English or Spanish. All I did was feel her. That beautiful lust-filled gaze. Her pussy clenching around my cock. Her soft body yielding to mine.

Our moans and grunts mixed together.

She felt so good. I fucking loved her. I had waited for her for a long time. I’d never let her go. I rutted into her mindlessly, deeper and harder.

“Oh my God. Raphael, Raphael.” My name spilled from her mouth like a prayer. “Please, Raphael,” she panted. “More.”

I thrust harder, worrying in the back of my mind if I should be gentler. Sweeter. But I was so far gone and she hadn’t stopped me yet. I took her mouth and continued thrusting, rutting her deeper. Our tongues tangled, the rhythm of it matching my thrusts. We kissed hard and rough, our teeth and tongues clashing together.

She cried out. I felt her body tighten underneath me, but I couldn’t stop fucking her hard. She cried out against my mouth and I swallowed her sound. The sight of my reina orgasming would be my sole goal for the rest of my life. My addiction.

Her pussy clenched around my cock in a chokehold. Her body shook against me and I fucking loved it and kept riding her until my own climax shot up my spine.

I came harder than ever before, my cock pulsing inside her and my every muscle tightening.

“Mi reina,” I grunted as I spilled inside her, my face buried in the crook of her neck.

It wasn’t until the smell of primrose and sun on her skin seeped into my lungs that I realized I had fucked my virgin wife like a beast.

I lifted on my elbow. “Fuck, I’m so sorry, Reina.”

The softest smile I had ever seen on a woman lingered on her lips and her expression was that of pure bliss.

“That was–” she murmured, her eyelids heavy. “Amazing,” she murmured.

Then a soft snore sounded in the room and a smile stayed on her face.

We never made it back to see our guests.

I watched Sailor sleeping, tucked in my bed, facing me, and I finally found my peace. She had filled my thoughts since that night we danced in La Reina eight years ago. I wanted her then, and now I finally had her.

She balanced me. The passion that brewed between us burned hotter than anything I had ever experienced before. The two of us lost in the throes of passion left us alone in this world where only we existed.

Nothing and nobody would take her away from me again. Gabriel and Sailor were family. *My family.* The kind I didn’t have, neither with my father nor my brother. Only with my mother for a few short years.

My mind shifted back to my brother’s funeral. The last time that my father held something over me.

I stood outside of the church and nobody paid me any mind. It was no surprise. I had been invisible, the just-in-case son since I was born. And I was perfectly fine with it. I had been hiding in plain sight, always undetected because I did my own things in the shadows.

And now, with Vincent gone, this was not the scenario I had imagined for myself.

The reporters lurked in front of the church, waiting for a glimpse of me. To see if it was true, that I was the heartless killer of my own brother. I might have been heartless, but I wasn't his killer.

As I headed toward the entrance of the church, reporters swarmed the area like flies on shit. Vincent and my father thrived on it. I fucking hated it; just as I hated them. They made a deal with the Tijuanas and trafficked women, allowing them to dock at our warehouses. Even more, they thought to double cross the old Nikolaev. No fucking wonder Vincent found himself dead. Brother or no, the sick fucker deserved it. I'd seen what he had done to some of those women he smuggled in. Branded them. Dug their eyes out of their sockets.

My father was a sadistic bastard, but Vincent took it a few notches too far.

Microphones were shoved in my face. Everyone wanted a goddamn statement. The reporters would kill to get an exclusive. So I guess they weren't much better than us.

"Raphael, is it true you don't have an alibi for the night of the murder?" one reporter shouted.

"Mr. Santos, did you order a hit on your own brother?" My fists clenched, but I never broke my stride and my face was blank as I pushed my way through the crowd. By the time I reached the heavy wooden doors of the church, everyone's shouts were nothing but white noise.

Accusations didn't matter. Regret did - that I let Vincent get away with too much. That I didn't bother looking into what he was doing or the deals he was making until there

was such a stain on our family name, it would take gallons and gallons of bleach to clean it off.

Gripping the ornate door handle, I swung it open and crossed the threshold of the church. Surprise, surprise, it didn't burn down.

"About fucking time you showed up," Caine greeted me with a grumble. "Your father is on some kind of rampage. The priest is pissing himself, scared to start the service."

"He better change his clothes before he starts the service. Nobody wants to smell that shit."

Caine settled his gaze on my face and the multiple wounds scattered around it. I didn't look my best. I could still taste the metallic tinge of dried blood on my tongue. I knew by now I sported a few black and blue bruises and I had a deep cut on my forehead.

"What the hell happened to you?"

I just shrugged. There was no sense in going into the details of my encounter with the Tijuana Cartel who were picking up a shipment in our warehouse. Bottom line, I broke the agreement. Fucked up a few of their guys, killed the rest and got the women that were shoved into a container like cattle out of there.

Cassio and Luca had them now. They'd get them to safety.

Motherfucking Vincent. I had no illusions that my father knew about it too. It was one business my grandfather never touched. It was one business we should have never touched.

"Your father will give you shit when he finds out." Yeah, he was stating the obvious there.

Caine folded his arms, glaring at me. It was one of the reasons we were good friends. He gave me shit the straight way, giving me his honest opinion. Whether I wanted him to or not. That was rare in our world.

"For fuck's sake, Raphael. I know you're pissed." He lowered his voice so nobody else could hear us. "Now that

he's gone, you can make changes. Your old man can't stop you."

"He'll try." Fire blazed in my chest at the images of women I had seen. "But he won't succeed."

He nodded. "Just play the part. Blindside him."

It was easy for him to say. He didn't witness what I had. I could tell which women Vincent had sampled in that bunch. Every single one was left with one scar or another. It made my stomach churn. If he was still alive, I might have killed him myself.

With a terse nod, I moved further into the church, only to be assaulted by an overpowering scent of flowers. Hundreds of arrangements and wreaths lined every pew and corner of the church. I wondered if it was to hide the evil stench of the man who laid in that casket. Or the one who sat in the first row with his head bowed.

It was the only fucking time my father bowed his head. In church. Maybe it was to seek forgiveness so he could do more fucked up shit. Or maybe he thought he could buy his absolution, who the fuck knew.

I walked past the full pews filled with extended family, soldiers, politicians. Even rivals. I narrowed my gaze on Santiago Tijuana seated there with some bimbo with fake boobs that came up to her chin. He had the most horrid taste in women.

Without acknowledging him, I continued to the front. Three more steps. Two. One.

It was then that my father finally spotted me.

"It should be you in that casket," my father sputtered in Spanish. "Not my firstborn."

Nothing like a family reunion in which you were wished dead!

"Funny, I could wish you dead too," I warned, giving my father my full attention for the first time in years. As suspected, he turned bright red, ready to blow a gasket. Now that could be entertaining.

“Be careful, mi hijo,” he hissed. It was the first time in over a decade that he called me his son. I could have gone another decade without it. “Or I could find a way for you to visit your mother.”

I was my mother’s favorite. Vincent was Father’s. And my old man knew exactly how to ensure allegiances.

“Your mother doesn't need makeup when her face is purple, blue, and swollen," he drawled and fury shot through me like heroin. A slow smirk spread across his face, and I wish I could beat his old ass. "I love hearing her scream."

You’d think a mother would come to her son’s funeral. But we weren’t an ordinary family. We were fucked up, the whole nine yards. My mother gave birth to Vincent, but he stopped being her son with the first rape he committed. Under her roof. She hated him as much as my father. After all, it was how we came to be. The old fat prick forced himself on her.

Last time Father saw her, she was bloodied, bruised, and trembling so badly; she had to be untied and carried out of his bedroom. My chest tightened at that disgusting memory and my composure slipped for a fraction. I had never wanted to kill my father more than in moments when he found torturing my mother a form of entertainment.

My mother was my weakness. She didn’t deserve this fucked up fate nor that old bastard of her husband.

No woman deserved that shit.

And still I didn’t save her. My eyes lowered to my wife in my arms.

I’d save this one, even if I had to die in the process.

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Chapter Thirty-Eight

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SAILOR

I woke up, and the first thing I saw was the clear blue sea with a great Kiskadee bird, sitting confidently solo atop a branch. The dramatic white stripe on his black face made him one of the unique birds on the Colombian coast.

Honeymoon. Then slowly the events of the last day came rushing through. The wedding. Our trip to the Rosario Islands. Colombia. Our honeymoon.

We arrived last night to the island off the Colombian coast that has been on my bucket list for a very long time. Go figure that Raphael would pick that for our destination. I freaking loved it. Gabriel was with Aurora, Alexei, and Willow. They'd stay with him until the day we were scheduled to return.

The sun shone into the bedroom, the humid, tropical air thick. I breathed in, then exhaled as I listened to the rustle of the trees, waves, and chirping of birds.

The spot next to me was empty and I sat up to find Raphael sitting at the foot of the bed.

"Good morning."

Smoothing my hair, I combed my fingers through it. "Morning." He handed me a cup of coffee, and I reached for it. "Thanks."

“Did you sleep well?”

Heat rushed to my cheeks. He chuckled. “Sailor, I tasted every inch of your body last night, and you’re going to blush when I ask you how you slept?”

I rolled my eyes. “Fine. I slept just fine.”

He grinned, a self-satisfying grin.

“Want to go for a swim?”

My eyes flickered to the window. “Are the beaches crowded here?”

He shook his head. “It will be just us.”

“Okay.”

The white sandy beach was empty. The sound of the waves softly crashing against the shore traveled on the breeze. The sun felt good against my skin. It was the first time I felt completely at peace since Anya died.

Raphael rested next to me. His aviator glasses shading his eyes and his tattoos on full display. Something in my chest fluttered, like the fragile wings of butterflies and feelings blooming.

He looked good in his white swim shorts. His skin appeared darker and my fingers reached out to trace over his tattoos. I loved touching him. I traced over his warm skin, my skin in such contrast to his.

“Reina,” he murmured, never moving. “If you keep touching me like that, we’ll end up naked.”

My lips curved into a smile. “That’s not such a bad thing.”

“Come here.” He pulled me over, and I laid my head on his chest, closing my eyes and putting my face up to the sun while I listened to his strong heartbeat.

I smiled dreamily, enjoying the warmth of the sun and him against my skin.

“This place is heaven,” I murmured, listening to the waves and the rustling of the leaves.

“No, you’re heaven.” I smiled against his chest, inhaling his scent deep into my lungs. “You’re smiling.”

I lifted my head. “How did you know?”

He removed his sunglasses and the moment his blue eyes clashed with mine, suddenly oxygen felt in short supply.

“You glow when you’re happy.” I put my head back on his chest and closed my eyes.

I scoffed softly. “Maybe I glow when I’m mad.”

His chest shook under my head, and I rolled over so I could see his face. He was laughing, his eyes twinkling with amusement.

“Raphael?”

“Hmmm.”

“Will you put sunscreen on me?” I asked, digging the sunscreen out of the little beach bag before handing it to him.

I needed his hands on me. I needed him all over me.

He reached for my cheek. His roughened knuckles ran down my cheek. His eyes softened, desire lurking in his gaze, as his thumb skimmed the edge of my bottom lip.

“No sex until you feel better.”

“I feel better. I promise.”

I rolled onto my stomach, and after a heartbeat, I heard the squeeze of the sunscreen bottle and I closed my eyes, smiling happily against the towel. He straddled my ass, his hands rubbing together, then I felt his rough palms slide up my back. He unfastened my bikini top, and he carried his movement up to my shoulders.

“I like this bikini on you, Reina.” Raphael never stopped his movements, rubbing the lotion over my skin. “Although, I like you even better without it.”

I turned my head to the side and glanced at him over my shoulder. “We could take it off,” I suggested using my most

seductive voice.

His hand lowered, down and down, until his palm rubbed my half-naked ass in the string bikini bottoms. While Raphael opted for white swim shorts, I opted for a black bikini. Striking differences between us. Yet, despite all our striking differences, the two of us complemented each other.

“You called Gabriel?” Raphael asked. Right as we got ready to leave for the beach earlier, Raphael got a business call he had to take so I took advantage and called Aurora so I could talk to Gabriel.

“I did. Aurora, Alexei, and he were on their way to the beach. Surprisingly he likes Alexei,” I remarked.

“He’s a likable guy,” he retorted.

I lifted up on my elbow and twisted my body around so I could see him better. “Likable guy?”

“Okay, he’s a bit tense. But he’s a good man.”

I believed him. “What about your call?” I asked.

His expression never changed, but he tensed. Barely a flicker but it was unmistakable. “Is something wrong?” I couldn’t help but question.

“No, everything is fine.”

It wasn’t. I’d stake my life on it. He moved away and I turned back over, then brought my knees to my chest.

“Raphael, if something is wrong, I want to know,” I told him.

“It’s business stuff,” he assured. “Nothing for you to worry about.”

Okay.

Our gazes locked, at this very moment, it almost felt like we were the only ones in this universe. Without danger or twisted contracts to hang over our heads.

I let out a heavy sigh.

“What’s the matter, Reina?” Raphael cupped my face. “Tell me what’s on your mind. What’s worrying you?”

“How does this end?” I blurted out. “My father. Santiago Tijuana. Their contract. Neither one of them will just stop, I know it.”

He cupped my face. “Don’t worry about it, Reina. I’ll take them both down.”

“I was so close to taking Father down,” I murmured. “So damn close, and that bail was set. I know it was Father who pulled the strings.”

Smart woman. It didn’t surprise me that she knew.

“How long have you known?” he questioned. He could see too much. Probably knew too much too. “How long have you known that your father made sideline deals with criminals?”

I swallowed hard. “Since- “ It was so hard to talk about Anya. So fucking hard to think about that night in Miami when we walked into Lombardo Santos home, like lambs going to slaughter. “Since Anya went to see your dad,” I admitted softly. “I’ll never understand why she agreed to it, but she said Father demanded it. Or else.”

A cold sweat broke out beneath my skin. Just as it always did when I thought about that night. We were in the middle of paradise and I could barely breathe. There wasn’t enough oxygen out here.

“Breathe,” he demanded. I gripped his arms. My ears rang. My lungs closed up. “Reina, breathe.”

I inhaled deeply and it still wasn’t enough. Panic tore through my chest. I was suffocating.

Cool water hit my skin. And it was only then that my lungs opened up. The pressure eased up in my lungs and air finally found its way into my bloodstream.

The fog cleared in my head, and I buried my head into Raphael’s warm chest. Waves rose and fell against our bodies, washing away my fear.

He kept me pressed against his warm body, and it was only now that I realized how badly I shook. I held on to him

like he was my whole life. I feared he might have already become a big part of my life.

“Better?” Raphael asked. He was my life raft in the storm.

I nodded, dragging another deep breath into my lungs. Relief was strong. Overwhelming.

“Yes, thank you.”

I rested my face against his neck and wrapped my legs around his waist, while he ran his hand through my hair. Over and over again. The act was soothing, peaceful. I inhaled a steady breath. My heartbeat slowed. The wind swept through my hair. And all the while, my lips skimmed over his neck.

He felt so good. His body was strong against mine, skin to skin. My fingers played with the ends of his dark hair.

“One day you’ll have to tell me what happened,” he said softly. Something dark rumbled beneath his skin, a hint of vehemence showing through. My body trusted him. My heart trusted him. But it was my mind that was scared.

I had never told anyone. Neither had Anya. It was our secret. Our shame. Sometimes I wished I could have told someone, so they could have saved my sister. So she would have stopped sacrificing herself for me. But she made me swear.

“One day.” My words were quiet. Soft. Promising. “Will you kiss me now?”

Raphael’s gaze dropped to my lips, dark hunger in them. Possessive. Deep. Dark. Consuming.

Leaning in, I brought my lips to his, pausing a breath away. My tongue swept across his bottom lip then took a pull on it. Heat pulsed and spread through me like wildfire, my pussy throbbing with a need. For him.

Then I nipped at his bottom lip, while my fingers clutched in his hair. A low groan rumbled in his chest. I even found that sexy when it came about him.

“Take me back to bed,” I murmured as I licked his lips again. Pure, unadulterated need swam through my veins.

With his strong stride, he powered through the waves, onto the beach and all the while my mouth never left his skin. There was no finesse to my kiss, but I couldn’t stop kissing him. Tasting him.

We were no longer at the beach. I had no idea how long it took to get back to our little cottage or the bathroom. I slid off his body, my feet touching the cool tile. We discarded our swimwear eagerly.

I placed my palms against his chest, his heat seeping into me. My fingers traced over the tattoos on his chest and down his rock-hard abs. With each inch closer to his pubic hair, my heart thundered harder and my pulse raced faster. He’d taken me multiple times now, and it still wasn’t enough.

I lifted on my toes and reached for his lips. I lingered a breath away, his form suddenly still. As if he waited for something. For *me*. I closed the distance and unleashed his hungry monster. He kissed me with such passion that I couldn’t keep my eyes open and every thought left me.

Our kissing turned frantic. Like we’d both been starving for years for a human touch. We broke the dam and left an unhinged desire in its wake. My hands went to his hair, tugging him closer. I needed him closer, his skin on mine.

“Raphael, please,” I whimpered.

His hands grabbed my ass and lifted me up, my legs wrapped around his waist.

He bit my bottom lip, gently but enough to sting and I moaned into his mouth. I could feel his desire blazing and clashing with mine. Somehow we found each other in the bathroom, my back pressed against the cool tile, cooling my scorched skin.

I opened my eyes to find his eyes on me, drinking me in. The dark blue gaze blazed with an inferno in its depths.

I slid down his body and he undid my swim top and tossed it to the side. His fingers trailed down my body, causing goosebumps over every inch of my body. His rough palm against my soft skin sent shivers down my spine. His fingers hooked onto my swim bottoms and he lowered himself onto his knees, sliding them down my legs.

A hiss of appreciation left his lips. My legs quivered and would have failed me if his strong arms weren't holding me up. He spread my legs, his gaze burning holes in my skin and causing a pulsing ache between my thighs. My sex throbbed, the evidence of my arousal trickling down my inner thigh. The moment his mouth connected with my pussy, a loud moan echoed through the bathroom, vibrating against the tile.

He lifted one of my legs and draped it over his shoulder, his mouth never leaving the most intimate part of me.

"Mmmmm." The noise of him vibrated through my core and my fingers tangled into his dark hair.

"Raphael. Oh my God, Raphael." He kissed me with an open mouth, shoving his tongue inside my entrance. "Fuck."

I buckled, my back arching off the tiled wall. The sensation was too much. Not enough. His fingers thrust inside me. His tongue swiped through my wet folders, sending a series of shudders through me.

I'm dying. The best kind of death.

He sucked and licked on my most private part relentlessly. Every single fiber of me shook with pleasure. It was right there, within my grasp. He was touching me.

"Watch me, Reina," he commanded, his voice hoarse.

I peeled my eyelids open, meeting his gaze as the muscles in his jaw contracted as he ate my pussy. He bit my clit and I bucked off the wall, arching into his mouth. His hand moved to my stomach, holding me still, and my hands gripped his head.

“Oh, oh, oh,” I panted, his laps never easing. He nipped my clit again and the orgasm tore through me like an opened dam. His tongue didn’t stop, he sucked and lapped, taking every last drop of my orgasm.

My legs quivered and my ears buzzed from the intense pleasure.

Once I was back on Earth, Raphael was back in my focus. His eyes burned with hunger but he made no move to undress, still wearing his swim trunks.

He stood up, his one hand still on my hip, while with the back of his other hand he wiped his mouth. Our eyes locked, our breathing synchronized, neither one of us looked away. I wanted to give him the same kind of pleasure. He owned all of mine, I wanted to own all of his.

Adrenaline shot through my veins, and my eyes locked on his bulky shoulders and all the ink marking his golden skin. His body took my breath. The sight of his muscle and broad chest, scattered with dark hair and beautiful golden tanned skin made my mouth water. I reached for his white swim trunks then pushed them down.

His stomach was rock hard, six-pack abs making my inner thighs pulse with ache. His large cock hung heavy and thick between his legs. So far, everything was rushed, but now I absorbed it all, drinking him in. Thick veins ran down his hard length.

He was a glorious sight to behold, all naked and mine. He stood still, his one hand on my hip, his other by his side as my eyes soaked him in.

I pressed my palm against his chest, his heart thundering under my touch.

“You are so beautiful,” I whispered, my eyes dropping lower.

Pre-cum dripped from the end of his cock and my hand wrapped around his thick shaft, rubbing his pre-cum with my thumb. A sharp inhale left his lips and my eyes raised to his blue gaze.

My chest rose and fell, struggling for air. This desperate need for him, the taste of him would be the death of me. Yet, I refused to be reasonable. I couldn't live a single day without tasting him.

He was my own brand of drug. And just like a drug, I'd have to break this addiction to him. Eventually. My heart skittered around inside my chest. Reaching for his lips, I softly kissed him. It would be the kiss I'd remember forever. The kiss that would ultimately break my heart, because it would remain seared in my mind.

His hand curled around my waist, his hard body pressing against mine.

"You are mine," he rasped, possessiveness vibrating in his voice. "From the moment I saw you, Reina."

Thump, thump, thump. There goes my heart.

The shower was still running and whatever restraint he had over himself over the last few minutes broke. He closed the space between our bodies. His mouth smoldered against mine, igniting a fire throughout my body all over again.

My hungry fingers roamed all over his body, needing to feel every inch of him under my fingertips. I lifted onto my toes, deepening our fiery kiss, moaning into his mouth.

He caught my wrists and pinned them above my head. With his other hand he took my chin between his fingers and slowed down our kiss. We were both slick from the water, but none of it registered. Only his body pressed against mine, his mouth moved against mine, adjusting the angle of our kiss.

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Chapter Thirty-Nine

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RAPHAEL

I swallowed Sailor's moan, our tongues sliding against each other.

My fingers trailed her slender ribs over to the perfect swell of her breast, then brushed her nipple with my thumb. Her blue eyes met mine and our gazes held as my cock pushed into her hot entrance. A shudder rolled down my spine at the feel of her tight pussy gripping my cock. It was heaven and hell at the same time.

I rocked my hips slowly, angling my hips to increase her pleasure. She gasped, her pale cheeks flushing crimson. Reaching between us, I slid my fingers over her clit and she shuddered. I thrust my hips faster and another gasp broke from her lips.

I lifted her leg and hooked it on my hip, changing the angle of my thrust and sliding deeper into her. She threw her head back, baring her pale, elegant neck. She whimpered, then moaned. Pushing in and out, harder and faster, her breathing increased. Her gaze sought mine again, holding it as I sunk into her, filling her to the hilt.

Keeping my strokes controlled, I thrust into her again and again, relishing in her tight walls tightening around my cock.

"Raphael," she gasped.

“That’s right, Reina,” I grunted. I could feel her reaching for her peak, her quivering body the best prize a devil could get. “Give me your all. Scream my name.”

And she did. I fucked her hard and deep. I closed my lips over her soft skin at her throat and bit. I wanted to mark her. Claim her.

She tensed then shuddered hard. I hummed my approval before plunging into her. Again and again, my pace grew faster. My cock twitched, her pussy squeezing harder around my cock and I pushed deeper. I kissed her mouth and slipped my tongue inside, swallowing another moan as she orgasmed all around me and taking me right over the edge.

One last thrust and I shot my cum into her with a violent shudder.

“Mi reina,” I murmured as I buried my face in her neck, both of our breathing labored. “I have finally found you.”

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Chapter Forty

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SAILOR

Okay, as far as honeymoons went, it was not a bad one. It was freaking amazing.

But the moment we returned back to his island, I felt the invisible bars surrounding me. When the helicopter landed on the island, Caine and Gabriel were already there waiting for us. The moment I stepped out of it, Gabriel ran towards me with Bruno at his heels.

A large grin spread on my face and I caught Gabriel as he threw himself into my arms.

“Hey, buddy.” I caught him and gave him a tight squeeze. “I missed you.”

He giggled. “It’s only been two days, Mom.”

I chuckled. “I know but they were two long days.”

“That doesn’t bode well for the groom,” Caine remarked teasingly. “Did he not perform?”

I rolled my eyes, ignoring his comment though my cheeks heated. Raphael more than performed. I felt it in each sweet ache in my muscles and I swore I felt like I walked funny.

“Guess what, Mom?” Gabriel asked excitedly, his eyes darting between Raphael and I.

“What?” We both answered at the same time. Raphael’s lips tugged up at Gabriel’s excitement.

“I look just like Raphael,” Gabriel announced.

My heart went ice cold and I blinked my eyes, before slowly drifting them to Raphael. He seemed thrown off by Gabriel’s comment too.

I cleared my throat. “What do you mean?” I barely got the words out.

“I saw pictures of Raphael and his mom,” he explained.

My eyes darted to my husband. “Pictures?’

He shrugged. “I have a few family photos in the library.”

My molars ground together. Did he think Gabriel wouldn’t explore the house?

“How come I look like you and not mom?” Gabriel asked curiously, oblivious to the tension.

Raphael’s eyes locked on me, unspoken meaning in them clear. It was time to tell Gabriel. Except, I didn’t want to. I wanted to keep all the filthy history away from him.

“Let’s go walk down to the beach, shall we?” Raphael suggested. I shook my head, but my husband was a determined man. “Yes.”

“You should have just ordered it from the get go, instead of making it sound like an option,” I muttered under my breath.

“Reina, this way,” he drawled.

I sighed. “I’m not dressed for the beach,” I attempted feebly. “Neither are you.”

It was a stupid excuse. He wore jeans that hung low on his hips and a black t-shirt, making him look like a handsome devil, while I wore a simple yellow sundress that came down to my calves. I would have preferred to wear a short mini-dress but Raphael grumbled about showing too much leg and then handed me this long dress.

“Nobody sees those *bonitas piernas*,” he muttered, calling my legs beautiful in Spanish. “They are all mine.”

It seemed a moot point to argue with him. Besides, there was something so fucking hot about the possessive tone of

his voice. So I threw my emancipation out the window and covered up my legs. But now, I slightly regretted it.

I glanced down at my long dress. Fuck it!

Gripping the material with my fingers, I lifted the dress and tied it into a knot, making it shorter. It came down to my knees now. Grinning like a fool, I raised my head and met Raphael's gaze. Amusement lurked in those eyes, instead of anger as I hoped.

Whatever.

We started walking down a wide path, bypassing a driveway that housed luxurious vehicles. Black Jeep, black Ferrari, black Lamborghini.

Yes, the devil loved black.

Too bad the elegant manor was made out of white marble. Black marble would suit Diablo so much better. The perfectly manicured green lawn ruined the image too.

But the lookout towers that surrounded the house and overlooked each corner of the island fit the image of the gilded cage perfectly.

Gabriel and Bruno ran ahead of us, uncaring of the tension and ghosts that lurked between Raphael and me. Our joined ghosts gave Gabriel his life.

"He's not ready to hear it." I finally broke the silence. Tears of helpless rage stung the corners of my eyes. "I can't tell him."

"We have to." He pulled me into the warmth of his body, his hooded gaze offering comfort and lust. I'd take the lust, but taking the offered comfort was far more scary. "We don't have to tell him everything."

"Everything?" I swallowed. We never really went into the gruesome details of how Gabriel came to be. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, we can just say that you adopted him when your sister passed away. If he asks about his father, we'll tell him he died and it made sense you took him in."

"And when he asks about you?" I rasped.

“You tell him that you didn’t know me.”

I took a deep breath in and then slowly exhaled. “That might work.”

“It will.” He seemed certain. “Children are resilient. It’s better he learns now than when he’s sixteen and teenage hormones are raging.”

“Speaking from experience?” I questioned, side-eyeing him.

He chuckled. “Throwing fits wasn’t a luxury I was afforded.”

“Ditto,” I muttered.

Gabriel’s laughter interrupted and it was a welcomed sound.

“We should go swimming,” Gabriel suggested, just as we stepped onto the sand. I slipped off my shoes and dug my bare toes into the warm sand.

“Not today, buddy,” Raphael answered. “Your mom and I want to talk to you.”

My heart drummed against my ribs. This was my kid we were talking about. I didn’t want to see shadows of doubt in his eyes. I never wanted him to learn of the ghosts that haunted me. I never wanted him to experience anything that Anya and I went through.

Gabriel’s eyes darted between Raphael and I curiously. “Okay.”

Folding my dress under me, I sat down in the sand and patted a spot next to me. “Here, come sit next to me.”

Bruno jumped onto my lap and Gabriel lowered next to me, while Raphael took his other side.

My eyes flickered to my husband over Gabriel’s head. A nod and I exhaled a deep breath.

“I have to tell you something, Gab,” I started softly. “But I want you to know that I love you. I loved you from the moment the nurse put you in my arms.”

Gabriel grinned. “I know, Mom. I love you too.”

Hesitancy slithered through my veins. I wished there was a handbook with directions on how to raise a kid. From the moment I held Gabriel, I've been going on instinct. Hope. Love.

I gulped, uttered a silent prayer and words spilled from my lips. "Remember all the stories about my sister. Anya?"

Gabriel nodded. "Yes, my Aunt Anya."

I chewed my bottom lip. "She's not your aunt." Gabriel gave me a confused look and my eyes stung. "She's your mother."

A wave washed against the shoreline. A normally soothing sound felt more like a dissonant crescendo, setting my teeth on edge. I held my breath, waiting.

"W-What?" Gabriel's voice was barely a whisper. I hated seeing my son upset. Fucking hated it.

"My sister was everything to me," I started softly, pulling him into my arms. "I was so lucky to have her. Whenever I was scared, she was always there for me." My nose tingled and my eyes burned. The pain of losing her never quite healed. "I loved her very much. Then she got pregnant by Raphael's dad with you. That's why you look like him."

"My dad didn't want me either?" Gabriel's voice was small.

Raphael's hand came to rest on Gabriel's shoulder. "He did but he wasn't a nice guy. Your mom, Sailor, she kept you safe."

I didn't think I was doing a good job here. "Your mom and I made plans. We wanted to move somewhere south, have a little cottage, and we'd raise you together. Neither one of us ever thought she'd die. So I took you as my own. I was scared that-" That the Santos family would hear about you. But it wasn't the right thing to say. "I don't know, sweetie. I think I was just scared. Aunt Aurora and her brothers, along with Aunt Willow, helped me. Blink of an eye, and years went by."

Silence followed. My heart ached. For him. For Anya. For all the things that went wrong. But it all led us here. It gave us a precious boy.

Gabriel glanced at Raphael. “Are you my brother?”

Raphael nodded. “We’re brothers.”

Gabriel’s eyes returned to me and I nodded.

“She loved you so much, Gab,” I rasped, emotions thick in my voice. “And so do I. We all do.”

My son's eyes shone but he didn’t cry. Our gazes locked and he buried his face in my chest. “I love you too, Mom.”

It turned out my husband was absolutely right.

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Chapter Forty-One

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SAILOR

Two days cooped up in this house. On this island. This world was a cage in the form of paradise and surrounded by a dreamy blue ocean.

I was ready to scream. Except I'd done that already, at Raphael's men. A lot of good it did me. I couldn't lose my shit with Gabriel around. He was fond of Raphael and after our little talk on the beach, he loved him even more. If that was even possible.

I felt like a caged animal. Anxiety and tension simmered under my skin. I needed to burn off some of this energy and this island wasn't big enough. I needed a hundred miles, not twenty miles between Raphael and me at this moment.

I attempted to leave the island to go shopping, but I was told no. When Gabriel and I wanted to go to the Miami zoo, we were stopped and told it wasn't a good time.

I dialed up my boss, planning on covering the editorial story, but before I could even say five words, the call was interrupted and the signal shut down.

It was then that I lost my shit. Rage vibrated in my veins while I stormed through the large manor and straight into Raphael's office. My hands shook with anger and I marched straight to the large mahogany desk he sat behind, like the devil ruling his hell.

I slammed both of my palms against the wooden desk. He wore a white dress shirt, accenting his biceps and giving hints to the tattoos I had come to know so well. He watched me with a dark, half-lidded stare, Diablo ruling his realm, while my heart raced with adrenaline and anger.

“Reina-”

“Don’t you fucking reina me,” I hissed. “Am I your goddamn prisoner or what?”

“You’re my wife.”

“Fuck the wife shit,” I growled. “A wife apparently can be a lifelong sentence too. Am I your goddamn prisoner?”

Animosity felt heavy in the air, dancing between us like poison.

“Sailor.” One word, spoken in a soft tone, but underlined with the slightest clench of his teeth. I didn’t heed the warning.

“Raphael.”

My husband gave a terse nod to the men in his room. I didn’t even glance behind me. All I heard was the shuffling of feet, his men clearing the room.

“What has upset you?”

This guy couldn’t be for real. Either he was dense, or he purposely tried to piss me off.

“*You* have upset me. And your men that won’t let me leave this fucking prison.”

“This is not a prison.” He leaned back into his chair, loosening his one button and my eyes flickered down to his bronze chest. If I could claw my eyes out, I would, because just a glimpse and I had to fight a shiver rolling through me.

Tousled sheets. His groans. My moans. His body covering mine, thrusting inside me.

Great, now I was all hot and bothered.

This man made me hyperaware of his every breath. Fucking bastard.

“It is,” I said, my tone slightly breathless. “It’s a prison if I cannot leave when I wish to.”

“It’s not a good time to leave.” That was it. No explanation. Nothing.

I was just supposed to accept it.

“Why?” No answer and that fueled my rage even more. Anger heated my cheeks, edgy beats to my heart that had my blood flowing with pure frustration. I didn’t want to be a weak woman, nothing but putty for him.

“Why, Santos?” I gritted.

He was up from his chair and around the table, his big hand around my wrist in the fraction of a second. He spun me around and bent me over his desk.

I tried to fight him off, but it was fruitless. His chest pressed against my back, my breaths filled the room and to my horror, I was aroused which pissed me off even more.

“Santos was my father.” His mouth brushed against my ear, and his hot breath warmed my skin. “I’m Raphael. Your husband. Your beloved. Your cariño. Take your pick.”

“My diablo,” I panted and I felt his body tense against me. Damn him and this languid sensation that pulled on my muscles.

He pressed his lips against my ear, while his other hand came around my waist. “*Your* diablo.”

Jesus Christ. What was happening to me? I was turned on unlike ever before. Confusion battled within me, and when his mouth nipped my neck, a visible shudder rolled through my body. He inhaled and then made a low sound of satisfaction. The vibration of the sound thrummed between my legs, making me painfully aware of every inch of him.

“Mi reina,” he rasped as his grip on my waist tightened. He pressed his front to my back, our bodies were flush with one another, and his erection pressed against the curve of my ass.

Sparks lit beneath my skin, sizzling the blood in my veins and I found it hard to breathe. My heart beat so hard,

in rhythm with the throbbing between my legs. In anticipation.

Goddamn him, I wanted him. Now.

My body went against my explicit order and moved, my butt grinding against him.

“Don’t start something you won’t finish, Reina,” he gritted and I could have fucking gotten off on only the sound of his voice and the restraint I felt vibrating through his every muscle.

I turned around and met his gaze. *Blue*. Devilish.

“I intend to finish,” I rasped. “Do you want to finish?”

My breathing labored, my heart pounded in my chest so hard, it made it hard to breathe. Or think. All I felt was the desire for him pooling between my legs and demanding to be relieved. I stood so close to him, his knees were practically brushing against my skin.

I closed the distance between us, and urged him to take a step backwards. One step. Two steps. And his legs were pressed against the couch. Like the true devil he was, he sat down, his knees wide open, welcoming me.

So I stepped between them.

Every inch of my body burned, only for him. My skin tingled, alternating between burning and goosebumps. This must be what addiction for the devil felt like - so good, but so bad for you. And still I refused to stop.

My body screamed for him, each cell in me demanding I get my relief. Maybe I waited too long, years of not feeling anything crashing down. Or maybe I have been waiting for this man and my body recognized him before my mind did. I just knew I needed him, all consequences be damned. This man, my husband, was igniting it.

The taste of him became my necessity.

My lips parted and Raphael’s eyes lowered to them, the fire in them matching the one flaming within me.

He didn’t move. He sat there, waiting, his hands seemingly relaxed but there was so much intensity rolling

off of him. As if he wanted to give me the choice. But there was none, because I was scared I'd burn out like a candle without him. I wanted his touch to keep burning.

He said he wanted my *everything* - to have my body and my soul - but then the Devil would demand a soul, wouldn't he? Except part of me wanted to go to sleep and wake up with his body next to mine.

I wanted to give him my all and overcome the invisible chains that held me back.

I reached for the hem of my dress and pulled it over my head, letting it fall soundlessly onto the carpet. My nipples tightened, tingling in expectation. Heat pulsed between my thighs, wanting to feel him there.

My bra and panties followed, and all the while he watched me with that heavy-lidded gaze.

My skin burned as I stood there, naked and breathless.

He leaned forward, lifted my breast to his mouth and bit down. Hard.

I yelped. "That's for barging into my office." Then he licked the sting and sucked, tugging on it gently and my head fell back with a moan.

He cupped me between my legs, sliding two fingers inside of me. "And this is my reward."

I needed him.

Like the sun needed the moon to balance the night against the day. His touch ignited me and calmed me. Now that I was so close to him, breathing in his scent, feeling his eyes consume me so effortlessly, my heart was stuck in my throat. I wanted him so much. I knew I'd fallen too deep into this supposed sham of a marriage.

From the moment I met him, I knew he'd light the match to my body and I'd disintegrate into dust without him. It happened each time he touched me.

I brushed a hand across his neck and into his thick dark hair. His calloused hands came to my thighs in a light touch and skimmed up my flesh, leaving a trail of sparks in its

path. His fingers grew firm, gripping the flesh of my ass sending the unbearable ache between my legs.

My fingers curled in his hair, the hot, slick need for him making me lose all my senses.

“Raphael-” his name escaped my lips on a sigh.

This need was so foreign and warning signs should have been flaring in my mind. But they weren’t. My mind was tricked by my body, whispering that I had been waiting for him. He was mine and I was his.

At least for now.

My eyes closed with the intensity of how right that felt. To be his and to claim him for mine. His hands came back between my thighs and without warning, his one finger pushed inside me.

“Fuck,” he rasped in a rough voice. His voice ran down my spine. This man was everything. Love, lust, and happiness. The thought rang in the furthest corner of my mind, but it was drowned out as his mouth latched onto my breast again as he dragged his teeth across my nipple. All the while his finger fucked me slowly, in and out.

My head fell back and my hands came up to his neck, holding on to him like my own rock. He kept moving his finger, the pressure building between my legs till it was too much and I was scared I’d disintegrate into ashes.

I swayed into him, uncaring if I burned out. It wouldn’t be such a bad way to go, with his mouth on me and his touch branding my skin.

“So fucking wet,” he growled. Two fingers slid deep inside me, and my head fell back with a moan.

“Oh my God,” I panted. The pressure built; I was so close as he fingered me hard and fast. Over and over. My skin was so hot and a fire burned in my lower belly, creating a blaze that only he could feed.

His mouth worshiped my breast; his tongue and teeth alternated between nipping and kissing. His fingers slipped in and out of me, brushing against my clit, building the

pressure. I hadn’t realized that I was lowering myself onto his lap, grinding against him, desperate for release, until I had done it.

Until I had burst into flames, white lights shooting behind my eyelids and a shudder fluttered through my body, languid heat spreading through every inch of my blood.

His lips nibbled on my earlobe and his deep, raspy voice rumbled through me. “Mine. Forever.”

His claim should have brought me back to Earth, but instead had me floating higher into space. My heart beat hard against my ribcage. I opened my eyes and met his burning blue flames. I hadn’t realized my legs had given out leaving me sitting on his thigh.

“I want more,” I breathed, reaching for the zipper of his pants. My fingers fumbled with it, eager for more of that height. A dark chuckle sounded from his lips. I didn’t care. He helped discard his pants, and I reached for his shirt, my fingers shaking. God, I was eager to get another glimpse of his glorious chest.

Once his clothes joined mine on the floor, my eyes took him in. Nobody, and I mean nobody, had better abs than Raphael.

And those tattoos on his chest and his arms, covering his golden skin tempted me from the moment I’d met him.

“Stand up,” he rasped, a hard demand in his voice. He jerked me upwards, spread my legs and pulled me close. My pussy was next to his face. I braced myself with a hand on his shoulder, his hands digging into my butt and his face buried in my pussy. Fire ignited like a volcano, his mouth sucked and licked, nipping at my clit. My skin seared with need. My nails dug into his shoulder and I rolled my hips against his mouth. He was killing me, stealing my breath - and sanity. And I couldn’t have been happier about it.

Before the release shot through me, he grabbed my hips, slid me onto his lap and slammed inside of me.

A choked cry escaped me. He stilled, his eyes darkening and burning hot. I was still tender and sore.

“I’m sorry,” he murmured softly. His hands gentled on me. He leaned forward and took my lips with reverence, kissing me. Capturing my top lip between his, my body relaxed with each gentle kiss and touch he gave me. He leaned in and ran his lips down the length of my throat, trailing kisses that would brand me as his for the rest of my life.

“I’ll give you everything,” he rasped a promise I knew he would keep. His scruff brushed my soft skin, his teeth nipping at my collarbone. I sighed, my hands roamed his body. I wanted to feel every muscle, know every inch of him. His touch on me was hungry, urgent, and it fed the flames within me. I never wanted them extinguished.

I rolled my hips, slow and easy at first. The soreness was there but the fire and need for him was greater. I wrapped my arms around his shoulders and buried my face into his neck, inhaling deeply. He smelled like home, safety, Aguardiente and desire wrapped all in one.

A shiver ran through me, the heat sparking as I ground my clit against his pelvis. His hands roamed down my back, his hard palms scraping against my soft skin. They paused at my ass and his fingers dug into it, pulling me harder against him. He was deep inside me and with each roll of my hips against him, my moans became breathier, louder. I rose an inch and then slid back down, moving up and down against his shaft.

His hands took control and started moving me up and down. I wanted to give him everything too. He took my mouth with his, capturing my next moan. He fucked me, guiding my body up and down over him and hot pressure began to build. My breaths were heavy, my chest ready to explode.

“Fuck, Reina,” he groaned. He lowered his head and sucked a nipple into his mouth, and with each thrust inside

me, his teeth pulled on the sensitive buds.

“Oh, God,” I moaned. “Oh, God. Oh, God. Please.“

His fingers dug into my hips and he thrust again. Hard. And again. He took my lips in a hard kiss, bit into my lower lip and my body exploded as the pressure burst into a million stars. His body tensed, he pressed his face against my throat, let out a groan, then bit my neck as he found his release.

This was heaven. Or the most delicious hell.

We sat, both of us breathing frantically, my skin hot against his. Chest to chest and heartbeat to heartbeat.

Together.

Everything about this man soaked into the essence of my being and molded me. Changed me. Or maybe I had been waiting for him all along. I just didn’t know. I could have cared even less at this moment.

The only thing I knew was that parts of me that had always been a little broken healed around him.

My hands rested on his chest, this craving, a need, pulling me deeper into the pits of hell. His hell and I couldn’t find the strength to give a damn.

“Are you on the pill?” His question caught me off guard. Even more so because protection hadn’t crossed my mind.

“Yes.” I could feel my cheeks flush with embarrassment. Dumb, I knew it. I sat on his lap naked and I was blushing.

“I want you to stop taking it.”

I stared at him for a few moments, then blinked. “Absolutely not,” I retorted back. “I’m doing nothing like that until I’m ready and I can be sure my children are not threatened.”

He didn’t seem happy with my answer, but he said nothing else. “Raphael, tell me what’s happening?”

“What makes you think something is happening?”

He avoided answering me. “Because your men are on edge. You’re tense. Urgent calls.”

“It’s nothing for you to worry about.”

I let out an exasperated breath. “See, that makes me worry even more.”

“Don’t worry, Reina. I don’t want you stressing over nonsense.”

“If it’s nonsense,” I grumbled. “Why are you so adamant about not telling me what’s going on?”

I held his gaze, studying him. A muscle in his jaw tightened.

“A few of my businesses have been blown up,” he finally answered.

“Who did it?”

Something dark and ruthless passed his expression. “We are not sure yet.”

I’d bet my life he had an idea of who it was. Yet, he refused to say it. Could it be that maybe my father and Santiago Tijuana were retaliating?

“Is it Santiago?” I breathed my question. “Or my father?”

“My intel says neither one of them nor their men have been spotted in Miami.”

He said before he had many enemies, but the timing was peculiar. Too close to everything else happening.

“Are you lying to me?” I asked him quietly.

“No.” He was.

“So why keep me stuck here?”

He didn’t answer and I shook my head in disappointment. I wished I didn’t care, yet I did. Too much.

I shifted away and the moment I stepped away from him, my entire body screamed in protest. But certain things you just couldn’t let a man dictate. And he certainly wouldn’t dictate my freedom. I reached for my discarded clothes and started getting dressed.

The silence was even more deafening after what we’d just shared. I could hear the drum of my heartbeat and the ticking of a cuckoo clock.

I turned to face him and our gazes met.

“I want to leave the island,” I demanded quietly, my voice soft and languid, all those sensations still swimming through my veins.

“No.”

Fuck. This. Shit. “I want to end this,” I breathed. *Liar.* I didn’t want to end it; I wanted more of him.

“You tired of me?” he asked, his voice dangerously calm.

“That’s not the point, Raphael,” I reasoned with him. “But you can’t keep us here forever. It’s a prison sentence.”

“I say when you can leave,” he gritted.

Anger flared within me. All those wonderful feelings of just moments ago, gone in a flash. An annoyance that he’d think he could lock me down like that replaced them in an instant. “You said this was temporary.”

His jaw ticked, a pissed off expression flashing in his eyes. “Nothing about us is temporary. And I’d never said it was temporary. You assumed it was.”

“You- you…” I couldn’t find the right word to call him. “If that’s how it’s going to be, I want a divorce.”

“There will be no divorce from me, Reina. If you’re tired of me. Go to bed,” he told me with a smirk. “We’ll try again tomorrow.”

“It’s fucking three in the afternoon,” I pointed out annoyed. “I’m not the napping kind.”

His lips tugged up. “Maybe you can start taking naps. After all, I hear it’s good for pregnant women.”

“I. Am. Not. Pregnant.” My teeth clenched so hard that my jaw hurt. “And I’m staying on the pill.”

My husband didn’t seem perturbed by my anger. “Soon. We’ll work on it tonight, shall we Reina? For now, obey me. Trust me to keep you and Gabriel safe.”

My body temperature spiked at least a hundred degrees. At this very moment, I wasn’t sure whether I wanted to murder my husband or fuck him again.

Ugh, priorities!

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Chapter Forty-Two

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SAILOR

I slept in my old room. My feeble attempt at protest. And husband avoidance.

In just a few days, I got used to sleeping with Raphael's body next to me. The nightlight was on. It wasn't until I was back to sleeping alone that I realized I slept in the dark with Raphael. The nightlight never even crossed my mind.

I stared at the shadows dancing across the dark ceiling, cursing him, then me and then back to him. It was all his fault. He made me crave him. I was perfectly fine before he showed up. Well, minus the explosion and threats of murder.

With a sigh, I turned to my side and stared out the window. The moonlight reflected in the distance, the only visible light across the dark sky. Not even the stars could be seen. Just the lonely moon in the darkness of space. Kind of like this island in the middle of the ocean.

Yet, I didn't feel lonely. Just agitated as fuck.

I tossed around for the hundredth time and finally gave up on sleep. I threw off the sheet and slid out of bed. Quietly stepping out of the bedroom, I tiptoed down the dark hallway and down the back staircase to the kitchen. The light from the moon spilled through the large windows

and I opened the fridge door when I noticed a dark figure behind me.

Startled, I reacted on instinct and grabbed the first thing, then threw it across the air. The shadow ducked and avoided the milk jug, letting it hit against the wall and splash all over the title.

A familiar deep chuckle echoed through the kitchen. “Do you always throw milk at people?’

My heart raced and I put my hand on my chest. “Jesus, Raphael. You scared the shit out of me.”

“Were you expecting someone else?” he teased. He didn’t seem worried at all.

“No, but you could have announced your presence, you know?” When he didn’t respond, I continued, “What are you doing awake?”

“My wife didn’t come to bed,” he retorted dryly. “It makes it hard to sleep.”

A beat skipped in my chest and warmth erupted through my body. It was ridiculous that such simple words could cause such a ripple effect and make me melt on the inside.

My husband stood in front of me in nothing but pajama pants, his upper ink-marked body on full display. My body went white-hot as I stared at his hard, muscled chest. I had seen my share of men’s abs but none of them compared to Raphael’s. There wasn’t a single specimen that could hold a candle to this man. His six pack abs taunted me to push my soft body against his. Those strong hands threaded with veins and ink could be so rough, yet so gentle.

Peeling my eyes away from him by sheer will, I went into motion, rushing to grab a roll of paper towels and soaked them against the tile. Then I ran over to the trashcan and brought it over so I would avoid drips across the kitchen.

All the while I avoided looking at the most magnificent, mouthwatering body ever, painfully aware of his presence, watching my every move. The least he could do was help. But he stood there as a statue, his gaze burning me.

I washed my hands, his gaze burning a hole into my back. God, this man was making a goddamn idiot out of me. My eyes darted to the window, but darkness concealed any kind of view.

Once I dried my hands, I rushed to the big French doors and cracked them open, hoping the fresh air would help soothe this nervous energy buzzing underneath my skin. I opened the door and a warm breeze rushed in. Closing my eyes, I inhaled deeply, then exhaled. I repeated the process again and again, desperation growing with each second.

I got myself into this mess. Even worse, I put Gabriel's life on the line. Although, the contract my parents had with Santiago Tijuana told me that we were headed for trouble all along. I just got us there a bit faster.

"Reina, we have to talk."

My eyes darted to him, watching him surrounded by darkness. My heartbeat vibrated underneath my chest. The way he looked at me made me weak in the knees.

With a heavy sigh, I glanced out the door, then returned my gaze back to him. Darkness danced between us - his, mine, ours. The glow of the moon threw just enough light to see ghosts flickering in his expression and I wondered if he could see mine.

"Are you going to tell me why you're keeping me trapped on this island?"

I couldn't face my ghosts nor the overwhelming guilt. Not yet.

"It's not safe right now," he explained, but the vagueness of it didn't escape me. "There are threats coming in and I can't risk something happening to you or Gabriel."

"Was it your intention to ever let me go?" I questioned. He didn't need an explanation. He knew exactly what I was referring to. This marriage was supposed to be a farce, a temporary protection. And he made it into a permanent knot.

“No.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re mine,” he stated, like it was the most natural thing in the world. “Because you’ve been mine for a very long time.”

Something about the way he watched me unsettled me, as if he waited - for what, I didn’t know.

Wait. What? He said I was his for a very long time.

Another nudge in my memory, but it dissipated before I could latch on to it.

“We just met,” I responded, my voice weak and my blood pulsing in my ears.

He let out a sardonic breath. “You’ve been mine for years, Reina. From that first dance in La Reina. From the first word you said that night, I’ve been under your spell.”

And just like that, the memory dropped into place.

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Chapter Forty-Three

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RAPHAEL

She finally remembered.

I could see it in her beautiful eyes and in her parted lips, shock evident in her expression.

"You," she breathed out. "I've seen you before."

Her eyes lowered to my hands and stayed locked on them.

"Diablo," she whispered. "The tattoo." Her eyes flicked back to my face. "I remember it."

She stared at me and I wondered what was going through that beautiful mind. The woman had no idea how obsessed I've been with her for years. She had never left my mind. It was hard to believe that after eight years, I was able to touch her. Call her mine. If she thought I'd let her go, she was out of her goddamn mind.

I waited too goddamn long to find her. I'd give her *anything,* but her freedom.

"I've waited a long time for you," I admitted softly.

She sighed and reached out, her palm coming to my bare chest. As if she attempted to claim what beat underneath it. It was hers already. It had always been hers.

"I forgot we went to that club that night," she muttered. "Truthfully, everything about that night was a blur except the end of it."

“The end?”

Her sapphires glimmered and sheer raw pain passed her expression. “Your father raped Anya,” she whispered so low that if it wasn’t just the two of us awake, I wouldn’t have heard it. “Father threatened her and told her she had to go see him. W-we went and then your father raped her. In front of us.”

I recalled the words from Byron when I ran into him and his sister in New Orleans. The girls got caught skinny dipping in my father’s pool. Alexei pretty much confirmed the same thing. It was Byron’s father that came to get them afterwards. Why wouldn’t Aurora’s old man have said anything? Was my father holding something over the Ashfords?

“Tell me everything.” I tried to control the venom in my voice. I didn’t want to scare her.

She swallowed, trying to keep her breaths steady. “We were on our spring break. Anya was invited to your father’s place. We all went along. Aurora and Willow got wild and jumped into the pool. We got caught. He and his guards shuffled us into one of the rooms that had bars. All of us but Anya.” I noticed the small tremor in her hand. “Then he raped her. Over and over again. We were forced to watch it. To hear Anya’s whimpers. And I couldn’t make him stop. I couldn’t even save her.”

Fuck. I hated my father, but at this moment, I wished I could bring him back to life so I could torture him. Make him bleed. Make him scream. For Sailor.

I took a small step towards her and took her face between my hands. She didn’t flinch. She didn’t step away. I took it as a good sign.

“He was a sadistic bastard,” I told her. “He destroyed everything he touched, including my mother.” My forehead came to rest on hers. “I wish I could take your pain away and change history. I so fucking wish that I’d have taken

you with me after I beat up that cabrón who touched you and kept you with me. Both you and your sister."

Because for a fraction of a moment, I'd seen her. It was the girl I caught my father choking in my office that night and I sent her off, thinking nothing of it.

Sailor's nose turned red, but she refused to cry, despite tears shining in her eyes. "I'm sorry. If I could go back and murder my father, I would. For you, Reina, I'd burn down the world. I failed you."

She shook her head. "You saved me from that creep in the hallway. If you hadn't come, who knows what would have happened."

I brushed our noses together. "We could have had all that time together. I should have snatched you like the devil I was and had you warming my bed and my home."

She blinked her eyes, then let out an incredulous breath. "Please don't tell me you haven't had sex since that night."

"I haven't had a woman in my bed since the night I met you eight years ago," I said. "Yes, I fucked other women, but never in my bed. Never in my home. That place was reserved for someone who meant more to me than a casual fuck. For you."

I took her hand in mine, her softness a stark contrast to my hardness. She was so fucking soft that sometimes I worried about breaking her.

I ran a thumb across the pale vein on her wrist and she visibly shivered.

"Are you scared, Reina?"

I watched her delicate neck bob as she swallowed. "No."

She tightened her hold, her arms hugging me and my chest swelled. Years of loneliness washed over me and it was her smell and her warmth that replaced it. I knew for the first time in forever, I was exactly where I was meant to be.

I lifted her off the tiled floor, her hands wrapping around my neck and her lips skimming down my neck.

“My diablo,” she murmured, her mouth moving against my skin. “I remember you.” She licked my skin, kissing every inch of it. And I fucking loved it.

I carried her into our bedroom. Yes, *our* fucking bedroom. Everything was ours, but she was *mine*.

“Raphael.” Her soft, husky voice seeped into every tainted piece of my soul. If I was her devil, she was my angel. Every inch of her body called to me. It always had.

Her clear blue eyes reflected my own lust and need, my senses consumed by her sweet arousal.

The moment I laid her down on our bed, I buried my fists in her hair and crushed my mouth against hers. Sailor might be soft but she kissed with the same fierce need as I did. Her hold on me tightened, pulling me closer and pressing her body against mine.

I groaned deep into her mouth.

“Mi reina, tell me you want this,” I demanded.

“Yes,” she whispered, eagerly tugging down my pajama pants. Thank the fucking Saints I didn’t wear boxers. “Give me everything.”

I cupped her ass and she wrapped her slim legs around my waist. I needed to be inside her. In one swift move, I yanked her satin babydoll nightgown and the sound of the tearing of the material filled the bedroom.

“That’s my favorite nightgown,” she murmured against my lips.

“I’ll buy you more,” I promised, discarding it onto the floor. Her panties followed and I impaled her in one rough thrust.

Both of us groaned at the same time, and I almost lost my mind when her warmth enveloped me, her insides clenching around me, drawing me deeper and deeper into her body. Then I started thrusting, in and out. Deep and fast.

“Raphael!” she moaned out. “Oh my God. Yes. Yes. Yes.”

“That’s right, scream my name,” I ordered harshly, seeking out her lips. She parted her mouth, welcoming the thrust of my tongue. This frenzy and hunger for her grew with each taste I had of her. There was no easing it. It was as if all the years I searched for her, that I waited for her, turned into a greedy motherfucker who had to make up for lost time.

I couldn’t temper my pace, thrusting into her hard and fast. Her inner muscles clenched around my cock, strangling it, sending me into a fucking spiral.

“Come for me, Reina,” I roared, our teeth clashing. She tensed, her head falling back against the pillows, and I buried my head into the crook of her neck, marking her with my teeth while she convulsed around my cock. At the same time, my own orgasm spiraled out of control, taking me into an oblivion where nobody but the two of us existed.

With both of us spent and my cock still buried inside her, a peace settled over me.

I’m never letting her go.

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Chapter Forty-Four

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SAILOR

The devil who saved me.

I've had him back for weeks, and I never even knew. How could I forget? He saved me, just like Anya had.

I barely remembered that night or that week. Except for Anya's rape by Lombardo Santos. It was like the entire night slammed to the forefront and my mind revolted.

It made no sense that I'd forget going to the club that night. I was almost raped and Raphael saved me. Yet, the only thing I clearly remembered from that night was the old Santos taking the last piece of my sister. That dead look in her eyes.

Maybe it was my coping mechanism. I had no idea, but I shouldn't have forgotten Raphael. Or the fact that he saved me that night. Before an even bigger threat came for my sister. Aurora tried to convince me to see a therapist after that day. I refused. I could barely even think about it, never mind talk about it. I *wanted* to forget.

After my husband's admission, I slept in his bed. Every night. Sometimes with my face on his chest. Sometimes with his body spooning mine, his arms holding me against him. And always with his heart beating in sync with mine.

Eight years ago, I danced with the devil. Then I ran, but he saved me. After the girls and I left, the events took a

turn for the worse, and I realized that my devil was in fact a savior. I should have stayed with him.

This time, I would.

Just like the first time I met him, something about this man touched me deep in my chest. It was warm and fragile. Days of stolen tender moments and some rough ones.

His mouth on every inch of my body was heaven. His body on mine was the sweetest torture. His skin against mine branded me forever his.

Days were a blur. Nights were a clear revelation.

The sun shone through the large French doors. The warm glow against my skin had me smiling in my sleep and reaching for my husband.

Contentment filled me. Yes, there were still things that needed resolving but we were headed in the right direction. I had no doubt we'd get there. Our paths hadn't crossed again to be torn apart.

I felt his hand roaming my body, his rough palms against my soft skin had become a different kind of comfort I had come to crave. His thumb brushed against my bottom lip. I parted my mouth, then licked his finger and sucked on it.

"My reina," he grunted, his big body covering mine. The rasp of his voice caressed my skin, his mouth skimmed over my neck and then he kissed me. I melted against his body, running my hands over his muscles.

"My diablo," I murmured against his mouth. My heartbeat hummed in happiness. In rhythm with his, and I'd have died a happy woman at this very moment.

The ringing of the cell phone shattered the air.

"Ignore it," I suggested. He kissed my throat and I tilted my head. He trailed his mouth down my throat as the

ringing stopped. Then his mouth took mine again. Hard. Wet. Possessive.

Then his cell phone rang again and his forehead came to rest on mine. I sighed. “I guess you better take it.”

He rolled off me and reached for his phone.

“This better be good,” he barked into the phone.

I could tell it was bad. Whatever the call was about, it had his expression darkening. He said nothing, just listened to rushed Spanish words that I couldn’t hear well enough to understand them.

Raphael ended the call with a dark expression and raking his teeth over his bottom lip. He was *really* pissed off.

“What happened?” I questioned.

He didn’t glance my way, his jaw tightened and his gaze locked on the horizon.

“My nightclub La Reina was blown up.”

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Chapter Forty-Five

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RAPHAEL

Message received, motherfucker.

It was a message by Santiago Tijuana. He came after me for taking something he considered his. And now that he actually met Sailor, he wanted her even more. He was the type that fucking thrived on getting the unobtainable.

Motherfucker.

He was trying to draw me out by striking my favorite club.

“I’m sorry.” Sailor’s hand came to rest on my bicep. “Did anyone get hurt?”

I clenched my teeth. “Yes, two men and a woman.”

It fucking killed me to know innocent people lost their lives on my account. I should have had better security on the place. Better guards. Better fucking something.

“Can I do something?” she offered.

“Yes, stay here. On the island.”

She stayed with me as I got dressed, then slipped on her own dress. Then she walked me down to the helicopter pad and I couldn’t help but feel my chest warm. She wouldn’t know that my mother always tried to see her husband out, and wished him a safe day.

He’d laugh at her face and send her back in. Until one day she stopped seeing him off.

I stopped and turned her to face me, then cupped her cheeks and brought my face close to hers.

“Be safe, okay?” she murmured, brushing her nose against mine.

I brought my lips to hers and kissed her hard. She tasted so fucking sweet. It was like giving water to a man dying of thirst.

“I’ll be safe.”

Diego and Caine approached us, and the pilot already powered up the helicopter, the powerful engine roaring it to life. “I have to make sure their families are taken care of.” And hunt down the Tijuana scum.

In less than thirty minutes, I was in Miami. Just as I landed, another one of my casinos went up in smoke. Yeah, the fucking heat was on me.

“Order all my businesses to shut down,” I gritted the order. “We can anticipate there will be more bombings, and I don’t want men and women dying on my account.”

Tijuana was a fucking idiot if he thought I’d take it lying down. It took me one hour, two phone calls and three men to get the location of Santiago’s drug shipment details. And looky, looky, it was happening today.

So as another building of mine, empty, went up in smoke, so did the motherfucker’s ten million dollars’ worth of drugs.

Payback was a bitch, and I’d gladly lose a hundred million over again just to see that Santiago bitch cry. I had never seen a man cry so many fucking tears.

Waaa. Waaa. Waaa. Motherfucker.

Diego, Caine, and I watched from the top of the next door building pulling his hair and cursing at the sky.

“You can dish it out but you can’t take it, can you bitch?” I murmured, watching him from my tower.

It was time I took the motherfucker down. Maybe his brother would be a better leader.

It worked for the Santos Cartel, didn't it? I thought with a sardonic smile.

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Chapter Forty-Six

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SAILOR

Tension crept through every cell of my being. Ever since Raphael and his men left expeditiously, I had been on edge. I roamed the mansion, from room to room, desperate to distract myself. Gabriel was fully engrossed in his game and I didn't want to distract him. The last thing I wanted to do was pass my panic on to him.

I attempted to work on the editorial I needed to do, but I couldn't concentrate enough to even finish a sentence, never mind a paragraph. I wished Raphael had told me everything he knew. I wished he was here. With us. I always felt we were safer with him here.

My gut feeling warned Santiago Tijuana was behind the explosions. And if he was, that put my parents in it too.

I entered the ballroom where the reception was held only a few days earlier. It was spotless, like it had never happened. I continued on into the adjoining room. A dining room, just as grand as any other room in this mansion.

Opening the large French door, I met two guards. They acknowledged me and I continued on down the path, each step leading me further and further away from the house. Before long, I found myself on the beach. I lowered myself onto the fine, white sand and let my eyes roam over the vast horizon.

Living here felt like being stuck in a permanent paradise. A permanent vacation, but I was bound to wake up to the real world soon. Raphael couldn't keep me stuck here forever. The place was heavily guarded, with men stationed on each corner of the island. This wasn't the way people were meant to live.

Maybe people like Raphael, but not me. Not Gabriel.

I wanted to talk to my husband about a plan. We had to figure out a way to have a normal life. For Gabriel. For our future children.

My heart stilled. *Our children.*

Never in my life had I thought about having children. But now, with Raphael, I wanted it. I wanted everything with him and Gabriel. Our family. *A happy family.*

A ruffle of leaves turned my attention off the horizon and away from my thoughts.

Beatrice.

What the hell was she doing here? I found her standing there in a pretty white dress, shifting in the breeze. Her beautiful, flawless dark skin was in contrast to the white dress she wore and my eyes reluctantly lowered to my own outfit. A hot pink dress with white and green stripes, while my own pale skin looked barely tanned.

I hate to admit it but Beatrice and Raphael would make a striking and exotic looking couple. Not that it mattered. He was mine now. And I was his.

I rose to my feet and smoothed the dress down then headed towards her.

She shouldn't be here, not unless Raphael changed his mind and he didn't strike me as a man that easily changed his mind. The devil was stubborn as a mule.

I neared her, ignoring the heavy knot in my stomach that screamed she shouldn't be here. I blamed my jealousy.

"Beatrice," I greeted her, stopping five feet away from her. "What are you doing here?"

A sinister expression on her face should have been my first warning. Maybe I was blinded by her beauty. Or maybe I was trying to convince myself that I felt no envy towards her. She'd been with him all those years, even if she was only his cook.

"I came for you," she announced. Yeah, that didn't sound freaky at all and certainly not the kind of greeting I had expected.

"You shouldn't be here," I told her. "Raphael won't be happy if he finds out you're trespassing." She didn't move. "You need to leave now."

Her eyes traveled the length of my body. "He could have so much better than you," she spat out bitterly.

My shoulders stiffened and my chin tilted up. "But he has me," I pointed out coldly. "So why don't you run along and mind your own business!"

"Raphael knows about the Belles and Mobsters agreement, you know?"

"What?" I asked cautiously. I had never heard about any Belles and Mobsters agreement before.

"The one Raphael's dear old papa bought from Benito King," she answered smugly. Her words didn't make sense. My mind searched through the names I ran across during my research. Benito King sounded familiar, but I couldn't quite place him. I was always so focused on the South American cartel.

She snickered. "Benito King was a New York crime boss. Your father needed a favor only a criminal could deliver. And boom. There you go."

A warning shot through me and my lungs squeezed. Suddenly all the fresh air of the Caribbean sea wasn't enough oxygen to feed my lungs.

"There you go what?" I questioned her. "You're not making any sense."

I eyed her suspiciously. Maybe the woman was on drugs.

She cackled, the crazy kind of laugh. The sinister kind. I've heard it plenty growing up around my father.

"I can see that you don't know crap." I swallowed the thick lump in my throat. "Do you want to know what the agreement was?" she questioned.

I shook my head, although every fiber of my being screamed yes. Except, I didn't want to learn it from her. From anyone but her. Scratch that. I wanted to hear it from Raphael. If he knew about it, he should have told me.

She laughed again, the menacing kind of laugh. "Raphael's father was going to break your sister in. Right after she gave him an heir, of course."

Squeak. Blood trickled down my hand. *Squeak.* Teeth marks on my hand, stifling my sounds. *Squeak.*

"Break her in?" I choked out, my own voice sounding distorted. Like I was drowning in the shallow end of a pool.

"Yes, so she could be a whore for one of the Santos' whorehouses," she bragged. She thrived on inflicting pain. "Anya agreed to it, you know," she continued, like we were talking about an everyday topic. Beatrice's beautiful mouth curved in a cruel smile, and I knew the final punch was coming. "So your father would leave *you* alone."

Anya sacrificed herself for me!

The familiar pain rippled through my chest and I struggled for breath. My throat burned. My chest flamed, the old cuts burning like acid on an open wound. The aching hurt so bad that I was certain I had to be bleeding. My eyes lowered down to my chest. Nothing.

I returned my attention to Beatrice, anger and hurt simmering through my veins. I wanted to claw her beautiful face, make her bleed and hurt. So she'd know the pain that I felt. That Anya felt.

"How do you know all this?" I choked on my own words. On my own pain.

"Santiago likes to share information when he fucks."

Her eyes flickered above my head and I followed her gaze. The familiar cruel eyes zeroed in on me.

I took a step back, my hands shaking with the familiar fear.

“There you are.”

Before I even had a chance to open my mouth and scream, his hand covered my mouth and a cloth covered my nose. The ether-like odor seeped into my lungs. Chloroform, I realized.

The world went black.

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Chapter Forty-Seven

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SAILOR

Rocking. Falling.

It felt like the entire ground was rocking underneath me. My eyelids jolted open and found darkness surrounding me. Without an ounce of light. It was then that I realized something was wrong. Raphael never kept the room in total darkness.

Then the last image I saw before I lost consciousness came to the surface. My father got me. My nightmare came to be. My fingers skimming over the soft covers of the bed I was laid out on.

I came across a button and pushed it. A soft light flickered in the room, and I looked around. The large luxurious bedroom, beautifully decorated.

Swish. Swish.

With horror, I realized where I was. On a boat.

Sitting up in bed, I felt groggy, but I ignored the sensation. I had to get out of here. My feet touched the plush carpet, and I took two steps towards the little window with drapes pulled over it.

The moonlight reflected in the distance and shimmered over the dark, moving surface.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

This wasn’t good. Did they take Gabriel? He was still in the manor when I went to the beach and the guards were heavy around the house. Maybe Father never got close to the house.

I was an idiot to leave the house. Hindsight and all that fucking bullshit.

My heart drummed hard against my ribs, making it hard to breathe. Fear wrapped around my throat like a tight belt. I felt like that little girl again, vulnerable and weak. Anya always protected me. It wasn’t fair. I shouldn’t have let her. She paid the ultimate price for me.

It was time I repaid that debt. By ensuring Gabriel’s safety.

The boat was moving very slowly and I hoped we were still close to Raphael’s island.

I reached for the door handle of the cabin and pushed it down.

Open.

The door was open. That was a good sign. Right? Leaving the bedroom, I went down the hallway, then made it up the stairs and toward the front of the boat. I was right, the boat was moving slowly.

One step. Another.

The light flickered in one of the rooms. I turned my head in its direction, and it was when I finally saw him. My father.

The same cruel eyes. The same cruel smile.

He was older, his hair thinner and wrinkles on his face more prominent. His glasses hid his eyes, but not the cruelty. He wore an expensive suit, probably to show his dominance. His platinum hair, so much like mine, was slicked back and his frame seemed smaller somehow.

I could take him down. If I have to, I’d wrap my hands around his throat and choke the living daylights out of him.

“Finally awake,” he purred in that voice I hated so much.

“What’s going on here?”

My attempt to sound strong failed. My mouth was too dry, my voice too weak.

“I’m going to tell you a very interesting story, little Sailor,” my father drawled. “It’s about you, me, your mother, and Anya.”

I attempted to swallow, but my mouth was too dry. It felt like sand in my mouth.

“You hurt Anya,” I spat back at him. My stomach coiled in revulsion. “I don’t need any of your stories. You disgust me.”

He threw his head back and laughed. A sinister kind of laugh. “But you’ll get it anyhow, little one.” I swallowed hard, fear filling my expression. “You’ve always been scared of your own shadow.”

God, how much I hated him. It was the blinding kind of hate that made you do the unthinkable kind of crime. I could kill my own father and never lose sleep over it. That was how much I hated him.

“You raped your own daughter,” I hissed, the old familiar acid bubbled up in my throat. It was revolting. “Over and over again. You destroyed her childhood. Our childhood.”

His cruel gaze roamed over me with disgust, like he was evaluating a piece of trash under his feet.

“You’re a disgusting piece of shit,” I spat out. “Sick in the head and my happiest day was when I walked away from you and Mother.”

He sighed with feigned distress. “Anya was never my daughter.” The admission was like a detonated bomb.

“What?” I stuttered, confusion clear on my face.

“It means that Anya wasn’t my fucking kid,” he spat out. “Did marrying fucking Santos make an idiot out of you?”

My father’s eyes raked over me and it took all I had not to put my hands in front of me to cover up as much of me as I could.

“Am I your kid?” *Say no. Say no.*

He must have seen the wistful expression on my face because he offered a tight smile.

“You’re mine.” *Extinguished*. It was a short-lived hope. “You don’t think I’d have let you off the hook if you weren’t mine.” The venom and insinuation in his voice was unmistakable, and I swore my complexion had to have turned deathly pale.

“Who’s her father?” I questioned, but he remained silent. “Your kid or not, how could you hurt Anya like that?”

“Because her father touched something that belonged to me,” he spat out. “Your mother learned since then that it was a mistake. She was used to high class living. But it was too late. She got knocked up. With that fucking bastard that I had to raise as my own.”

“You didn’t raise her,” I hissed. “You tortured her. Made both of our lives hell. You should have just given us up. You should have let her find a family that wanted her.”

He cackled. “But see, little one, I’d already had a contract signed by that time. I had Benito King hired to kill a man in exchange for a daughter. The Belles and Mobsters agreement that was unbreakable. And who better to pay it than Anya.”

Hate crossed my expression and slithered through my veins. Eight years away from my father weren’t long enough. The eight years away from him didn’t compensate for the first eighteen that I lived in fear. For Anya and for me.

Then his words sunk in. The contract was for one of his daughters. But Anya wasn’t his. “You tricked them,” I spat.

A smug expression on his face told me he was satisfied with himself. So fucking much that I wanted to stab him in his heart. Again and again. Like Raphael when he killed his first victim.

“I did,” he gloated. “And I told Anya if she didn’t drag her ass to the old Santos, I’d put you on the butcher block. She wanted to protect you at all costs. It was all about you

for her. I gave her specific instructions. I wanted you to see it. It worked better than any whip against your skin."

Horror entered my eyes. My father was Satan reincarnated. There was no other explanation for it.

"She was a kid. An innocent."

He chuckled. Fucking chuckled, like destroying a human life was a joke.

"She was never innocent. Born out of sin and died from sin."

I blinked. "You're sick."

A hand came across my face, the slap knocking me down to my knees. My ears buzzed and my cheek burned. My cheek exploded in pain. Tears stung the back of my eyes and it took all my will to keep them from falling. I refused to cry in front of anyone.

I blinked the tears away and raised my head. It was only then that I spotted Santiago Tijuana.

A scoff left my lips. "I should have known you couldn't pull this off on your own," I uttered the words, but my voice shook with emotion. "What happened to your hate of Hispanics, *Father*?"

Our gazes burned, clashing against each other. He knew I hated him. I didn't bother hiding it anymore.

"You fucked one Hispanic," my father spat. "What's another?"

"Raphael's my husband. And he'll destroy you." I desperately tried to stay strong. "Where is my son?"

Please don't have him. If there was a God, he wouldn't allow these men to get their dirty paws on someone so innocent.

"Don't worry, we'll get him too," Santiago chimed in. I let out a relieved sigh. It meant they didn't have him.

No, you won't get him. I'd keep my promise to Anya. Raphael would keep him safe.

"How did you find Raphael's island?" I asked, stalling for time.

I needed to figure out a way to get away from these monsters.

“Beatrice was more than happy to share the location,” my father drawled, pleased with himself. “She ran to Santiago, fucked him, and asked for help to remove you from the picture.”

“Of course, we had to get rid of her,” Santiago chimed in. “No witnesses.”

I couldn’t even muster the strength to feel sorry for her because she brought that upon herself.

“Okay, now the story,” my father murmured, as he reached out to smooth a strand of my hair from my face. I jerked my face, his touch creeping me the fuck out. “Once upon a time, your mother was promised to me.”

I rolled my eyes. “Such a boring fucking story.”

This time my right cheek exploded.

“Patience is a virtue,” my father purred. *Fuck patience*, but I knew better than to say those words. “Anyhow, your mother went and slept with an average Joe and got herself knocked up.”

“Wow, that must have hurt,” I spat out. “Knocked up by an average Joe.”

Santiago Tijuana took another threatening step but Father raised his hand, signaling him that it was okay.

“Yeah, a Hispanic average Joe. Miguel was his name, if I remember right. A construction worker, renovating our future home.” And his hate for the Hispanics finally explained. Not that I gave a shit. I wanted to see my father dead.

Then his words filtered through. He said ‘*was’*. “What do you mean Miguel *was* his name? He’s no longer around?”

He chuckled, in the creepy kind of way. “Yes, he was my first kill. He’s the reason I hired Benito King. To get rid of him. The man had no scruples. Since Miguel ran to hide here in Miami, Benito arranged with the old Santos to hunt him down and have him killed.” I swallowed hard.

Raphael's father killed Anya's father. Raphael's father raped Anya. Where did it end? "There was an irony in the way Anya ended up under him, isn't there?"

A sickening feeling grew in my stomach with each second.

The smirk on his face gave me the answer. "Poetic, right? Father and daughter destroyed by the same man. Me. The old Santos was just my tool. And the best part was that the payment was Anya. Not even my kid."

"You sick son of a bitch," I hissed, taking a step forward, ready to tackle him and strike him down. My father's expression turned feral and produced a knife out of somewhere, then flicked his knife.

A single cut. I pressed my hand against it, warm liquid staining my fingers. *Blood.* The color of blood was red. Just as my hate for this man.

"Temper, Sailor," Father taunted. "Haven't I taught you that controlling your temper is everything? Teach her a lesson, Santiago," he instructed, his eyes flickering to my side. Another strike on my cheek and I bit down on my tongue so hard, I could taste the metallic flavor of blood.

"You haven't taught me shit," I rasped, holding my cheek and blinking my tears away. I'd be damned if I'd cry in front of him. "Unless you want to count 'what not to be' as part of your teachings. Rapist. Molester. Child predator."

He tsked, clicking his tongue. "You want to know the best part?" he asked, ignoring my accusations.

"Not really."

"I'm going to tell you anyway," he drawled with satisfaction. Father took off his glasses, then cleaned them as if we were discussing today's news. Not his sins. "When your husband came to visit, he brought up the contract I failed to fulfill with the old Santos." My heart iced over and I just knew that his next words would break me. I could see it in his self-satisfied feral expression. "He demanded I fulfill it by giving you to him. He knew Anya wasn't mine

and I cheated the Santos family out of the contract. I guess the apple doesn’t fall from the tree. Your husband is just like his father. Raphael Santos wanted to buy you.”

Bum-bum. Bum-bum. There went my heart.

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Chapter Forty-Eight

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RAPHAEL

"Send all you have."

Caine ended the call, his mouth stretched into a grim line.

It had been two full days since I'd seen my wife and it fucking felt like two years. I was itching to go back home. To her and Gabriel. Yet, all I was doing was chasing my own goddamn tail here in Miami.

But it was important I visited the families of my dead employees. I owed them that much at least. I was finishing the visit to the last family of my deceased employees. But the moment Caine's eyes found mine, I instantly went on high alert.

It took all my mamma's upbringing to remain immobile and continue offering comfort. Then I sought out the youngest brother of the Colombian family. The boy was fifteen. "Raul?"

He stepped forward. "Yes, Señor."

"Take your mother inside," I ordered him. "You tell the funeral home to send all expenses to me. I'm going to establish a monthly trust for your family."

His spine stiffened and the young man straightened to his full height. "We don't want charity."

"It's not charity," I told him. "It's a debt owed."

He shook his head. “I’m going to get a job and-”

“You will finish school,” I cut him off, seeing the shattered expression on his mother’s face. She lost one son today, she didn’t have to fear losing another. “Then you’ll go to college. You nor your mother will go without. I’ll make sure of it.” When he opened his mouth to protest, I continued, “Then after you finish college, if you still want to work, you come and find me. Understood?”

I watched as mother and son walked into the little row home, then strode over to Caine.

“What is it?” I demanded, as cold dread washed over me.

I could have them brought here but the threat was greater here than on the island.

“Sailor’s gone.” Simple words. A rippled effect. “Nobody knows where she is.”

“Gabriel?” I hissed. Did she fucking leave me?

“He’s not… “ He trailed off, staring at me. “He’s still at the house.”

If Gabriel was still at the house, that meant someone took Sailor. She’d never leave him behind. I’d stake my life on that. But on the other hand, the meaning of that statement hit me hard.

“Someone took her,” I hissed. “She’d never leave him behind.”

He nodded.

“When was the last time someone saw her?” My anger clawed at my chest. My blood boiled. But I had to keep a cool head. I had to find my wife. “Three hours ago. She went to the beach and never came back.”

“Who’s the traitor?” I’d clean out all my fucking men, until I find the fucker who thought betraying me was a good idea.

“Beatrice.”

Fuck! So much for giving people a second chance in life. That bitch better hide because when I get my hands on her,

she'd be a dead bitch. Caine must have read my expression, because he added, "They found her dead body on the beach."

I couldn't dwell on that bitch. She picked her side. Rage filled me at the thought of Sailor hurt. Who did she betray me to? Sailor's father? Tijuana? Fucking who?

"They must have taken her by boat. Have Diego pull up all angles of surveillance."

"He's already on it."

Hell.

I ruled it. Thrived in it even. But this was so much worse.

My reina was gone.

I stood in the middle of my mansion unable to breathe. Unable to move. I needed her. I hadn't needed anything in such a long time, but I needed her.

The text message I just received was clear.

Santiago Tijuana and her father had her.

In one swift move, I hurled the phone across the room, and it shattered against the glass door of the display case. Pieces of glass flew across the marble floor.

All my senses were overpowered by fear.

Fear for *her*. Fear of losing *her.*

"I'll kill every single one of those pinche cabrónes." Fucking assholes.

Helpless. Scared.

I hadn't felt this feeling in so long, it tasted different than I remembered it. It used to be connected to the well-being of my mother. Yet, this one felt so much worse. It had every muscle in my body twisted up in knots.

"Lo siento, Reina."

I’d burn this motherfucking state to the ground. One way or another, I’d find her.

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Chapter Forty-Nine

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SAILOR

I'd die here, I was certain. With nothing but darkness to swallow me whole.

My eyelids were heavy. My entire body ached. The smell of rot, salt, metal, and piss mixed in the air. I sat up on the bed and scooted back against the wall, wrapping my arms around me. It was cold and dark.

Blood-curdling screams traveled through the air. The ugly sounds sent fear down my spine.

Squeak. Squeak. Scream.

My screaming. My arms tightened around me and I started to rock back and forth. Back and forth. I fought the urge to scream for them to stop.

Instead, I brought my hand to my mouth and bit into my flesh. Hard. A warm liquid trickled down my skin, the metallic scent a familiarity.

This was what nightmares were made of. How fucking ironic my life would end the same way it started.

Santiago hadn't raped me yet. But it was coming. I could sense it with each second that passed by.

Another scream. Different girl. Different terror.

My gaze flickered to the steel door, and I uttered a silent prayer it'd remain closed. Although it only prolonged the

long, torturous hours. Maybe it had been days; I couldn't tell.

I tried not to think about Raphael because it hurt. It fucking hurt so bad that I thought my chest had been ripped open. He knew his father tried to break Anya and he said *nothing.* He knew about the contract. He knew Anya wasn't my father's. He tried to make me into a contract.

Yet, he said *nothing.*

I wanted to scream my rage. The betrayal. Instead, I kept it all boiling inside me.

My throat burned. My eyes stung. My ears buzzed.

The door clanked and panic rose up in my chest as my eyes snapped in its direction.

"I've come for you, little one. My ice princess."

I couldn't move. The foul smell of the dark room and rot made me want to gag, except I had nothing left in my stomach. This was a nightmare. I had learned to breathe this fear of not knowing when the next whip would come.

Santiago Tijuana thrived on taunting me.

This was the taste of the terror that Anya endured for the duration of her life. Minutes turned into hours. Hours turned into days and nights.

My shoulders screamed from the pain, my head pounded and my vision blurred.

I might die here. Silent tears mixed with the sweat on my face.

Exhaustion was heavy in my lungs and my bones, but I still found strength to curse at my own stupidity. Anya made her sacrifice for my life worthless because at the end, I was too weak to fight.

I had no idea where we were. In the cellar. Somewhere in the Caribbean I thought.

Tick. Tock.

I lost the sense of time. The basement was dark, without any glimpse of light. No windows. Desperation replaced my fear of darkness. I grew weaker and more desperate by the hour.

Dying would be a welcome reprieve.

But I kept fighting. I kept on breathing, my mind revolting at the idea of giving up.

I bit into my lip anticipating another lash of the whip. It didn't come. But my body refused to relax. My mind knew the pain would come. Maybe I had reached the numbing point and nothing would hurt anymore. I lost count after twenty.

Crack.

I cried out as the whip slashed across my back. Yanking on my hair, he wrenched my head back. His breath made my stomach churn. I struggled to breathe and desperately attempted to jerk away from him.

I needed space to breathe.

Santiago's mouth crushed down on mine. Bile rose in my throat. I hated his touch. I hated everything about him. I bit him. Hard.

He yelped, jumping away from me like I had burned him. My head flopped forward and a hard punch followed. Pain exploded in my skull. Black dots swam in my vision. I blinked them away.

"Maybe we get your son," he taunted. "How fast will you break then?"

Panic in my chest suffocated me. Lack of oxygen in my lungs made me lightheaded. Or maybe it was from lack of blood flow.

Screams in the distance. Some poor soul enduring something that I was certain would come my way.

"Soon it will be your turn," Santiago promised, confirming my thoughts.

My head throbbed. My vision blurred. Fear exploded in my chest, but hope still lingered. That Raphael would protect Gabriel. Maybe he didn't care about me, but he cared about Gabriel. They'd never get their hands on him. Anya's legacy would live on through him.

"That fucker Santos had you first." The bitterness in Santiago's voice was unmistakable. "You were my repayment and there you went spreading your legs for Santos scum."

Crack.

Another whip slashed across my skin. "He might have fucked you, but I'm going to break you."

A choked sob burst from my throat, but I quickly swallowed it. Anya never gave Father the satisfaction of crying. I wouldn't give this asshole the satisfaction either.

It was then I felt it. His meaty, disgusting hands between my thighs, shoving them apart. His pelvis grinding into me.

I shook my head. *No. No. No.*

My mouth moved, but no sound came out. *Please, no.*

His fingers inched closer. Bile rose in my throat, a disgusting shudder rolled down my spine and goosebumps rose on my skin.

No. No. No.

Another inch and he brushed against my entrance. I jerked away, but there was nowhere to go. There was no running away from his dirty, disgusting fingers. There was no Anya to save me.

He forced my legs further apart and I fought him. Hard. Not hard enough.

His other hand grabbed my hair and whipped it backwards, making pain explode through my scalp.

"Stop," I whimpered.

He refused, pushing his fingers inside me. A scream tore from my lips, and once I started, I couldn't stop. I screamed until my lungs burned, until my throat turned raw and all

the while tears rolled down my face, the stinging a welcomed pain.

He thrust his fingers in, pain swelling through me, consuming me. I could feel his stale breath against my neck and his hard length pressing against my back. He breathed loudly, in and out, rubbing his cock against me, grunting.

I stilled and he thought he won. I heard this victorious chuckle, but my body remained immobile. Until he was exactly where I needed him to be. His head behind mine, his mouth against my ear.

I jerked my head backwards, our skulls crashing together. Stars swam in my vision and he cursed, his fist smashing my head against the wall. I felt warm liquid. His or mine, I didn't know. I struggled to see. Dots swam in my vision, blackness danced, tempting me to oblivion.

Then his hand curled around my throat. "No wonder your daddy didn't want you. Fucking whore."

"I don't give a fuck about my daddy," I gasped out, holding on to my consciousness with desperation. His grip around my neck tightened.

I'm dying. I was suffocating. I prayed for oblivion. For relief. To end this suffering. But not while he was in the room.

Anya endured years of torture. It had only been days for me, maybe, and I was ready to succumb.

Fight! I could almost hear Anya's voice. *Fucking fight!*

His grip loosened and air came rushing back into my lungs. And so did more tears. They rolled down my cheek without my permission, and stinging followed in its path. I didn't need a mirror to know my face was covered in cuts and bruises.

"A whore," Santiago spat out the words in disgust.

He took two steps forward, then gripped my chin, squeezing my jaw too tightly as he jerked my head to the left.

“By the time I’m done with you, you’ll be screaming my name.”

And all I could do was wait.

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Chapter Fifty

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RAPHAEL

Four days.

Four fucking days without her and I was ready to lose my goddamn mind. I couldn't sleep, I couldn't rest. My temper was short and deadly. The only time I kept any semblance of sanity was when Gabriel was around me.

And I did it for my wife. Only for her.

The starless sky offered cover as I led my men to Cuba.

Alexei, Nico, and Sasha came along too. My sister Bella, Vasili, and Aurora remained behind on my island keeping Gabriel safe.

Every single minute since she had been taken had been agonizing. I'd looked for the boat that Sailor's father and Santiago used to take Sailor. I'd searched every goddamn boat I got my hands on. Sailor's father didn't have a boat. Neither did that fucker Santiago. So I obtained boat sales records as well as recent boat leases.

And I finally found the cabrón who did. The piece of shit no longer had a boat to sell.

And thank fuck for Nico. It was only thanks to his relentless search that we were able to follow the path of the boat. He had to hack into several government satellites, including Cuba, to follow the boat to its end destination.

We hired fishing boats to offer us a disguise. Let's just say those fishermen would be settled for the next five years. But we needed a disguise, and they were the best way in. The only ammunition was what we could carry.

We were about a mile out from the coastline.

I'm coming, Reina. Just hold on.

The moment the fishermen hooked the ropes to the coastline, I jumped out of the boat and my men followed swiftly. The lack of sleep had my head swimming. But I couldn't stop now. I needed to get to my wife.

Once I had her back, then I'd sleep. With her in my arms.

My eyes traveled over my men. Diego and Caine by my side, as always.

"It's time to move. Remember the plan. Team A is to handle the guards. Team B is search and rescue. Any victim." I shoot them all a look. "We bring my wife home."

I couldn't allow doubt to creep inside my mind. It would fucking tear me to pieces. I had to keep it together.

For her. For Gabriel.

Alexei's eyes met mine. "If I had to guess, I'd say they'd keep her in a basement."

It was a good assumption. And I heard rumors of Alexei's distaste for basements.

"I'll check the basements with Sasha," I offered him a way out.

"I'll come along too," he said in a cold voice. There was no time to waste.

A terse nod and we were on the move.

Sliding my gun into the waistband of my pants, I made my way up the path that led to the little fortress. An old military compound from the old regime. Guess who bought it? Fucking Santiago Tijuana. I was going to owe Nico a lifetime of favors for all his help in locating Sailor, favors I'd gladly pay. Over and over again.

But first, I fully intended to level this place to the ground before I left this shithole.

Through the broken stone walls, we found our way into a courtyard.

And that was when all hell broke loose. The explosion rattled the island, making it feel like the ground was crumbling beneath us. The building walls shook, and screams came in from all directions.

“There are women inside,” Sasha hissed.

I sprinted toward the building, my group of men behind me.

Then another explosion went off, sending large pieces of stone scattering through the air. Men were shooting at us from all angles. We never slowed our pace, shooting back at them as we pushed forward.

Time was of the essence.

I reloaded my gun on the move while Sasha and Alexei covered me, shooting back at the bastards.

“These men are raining bullets on us,” Sasha spit out. “We’ll never make it inside like this.”

There were four doors - each leading to a separate building.

“Which building?” Nico yelled.

“We split up.” I glanced at the men in the group. “Two each. If you find any prisoners, take them back to the boats. The minute you find my wife radio me, and we get the fuck out of here.”

“Sasha and I are coming with you,” Alexei volunteered.

“Okay.” I turned to Caine and Nico. “Can you two lead the others?”

No questions. No delays. We all ran in different directions.

I powered through the door furthest to the left. The moment I entered, I could see the building was in worse shape than I originally thought. There were two floors, but half of the steps were missing, and I didn't think the explosion took them out.

I shared a glance with Alexei. "Basement it is," I muttered.

We continued down the dark hallway leading us deeper into the cellar. It was damp, the smell of blood, urine, and mold filling the air. The rough, stone walls made the hallway appear smaller than it was. Or maybe our big frames didn't belong here, both of us having to bend our heads to fit through certain sections.

When we came to the end of the hallway, we saw a single iron door that resembled a cage from the old gladiator days.

With each step we took closer, the whimpers grew louder. The three of us shared a look, our guns ready in our hands.

One step. Another. And another.

It was then that I saw them. Huddled in the dark. A group of five women, hiding in the darkest corner of the room. The stench was unbearable.

"Fuck," I hissed. This was bad.

"Turn your back to the door," I told them. When none of them moved, I repeated in Spanish. A fleeting shared glance and they obeyed.

Sasha put the little explosive on the door. The three of us stepped away and took cover. *Boom.*

It was strong enough to break away the lock on the door. We rushed through it. I roamed through every face, looking for the blue eyes that stole my heart. It wasn't here.

"She's not here." Sasha reflected my thoughts.

"Take the women out of here."

"Raphael, it's a dead end. You can't stay here. You'll get yourself killed," Sasha attempted to reason. But leaving

without her wasn’t an option.

“I’m not leaving without her,” I gritted. “I’ll check the south end of the building. You two get the women out of here.”

Alexei didn’t look too good. The usually unmoving cold Russian had sweat beading on his temples. He didn’t need another prompt, he started to urge women towards the door. He was a scary motherfucker, and in his state, I wasn’t sure whether he was scaring them even more.

A tug on my sleeve and I stilled, then lowered my gaze. A woman, about five foot tall, stood in front of me, fear clear on her battered face. She couldn’t be more than twenty, her odd colored eyes staring at me.

She pointed to the southern wall and I followed her finger, but didn’t get what she was trying to say. My eyes flicked to Sasha, wondering if he maybe saw something I couldn’t. He just shrugged his shoulders.

“White hair,” she rasped and my back tensed. She pointed to the same spot. Was Sailor here? I couldn’t see anyone.

I strode towards the area. The corner was empty. But it was then that I spotted it. The crack in the wall. I glanced over my shoulder and met the young girl’s eyes. She nodded.

“Gracias.” An acknowledgment nod. “Sasha, help your brother and take the women to safety. I’ll continue here.”

“You can’t-”

“I didn’t ask you what I can do,” I gritted. I’d find Sailor, dead or alive. Leaving without her wasn’t an option. “Take the women to safety. If I don’t make it back, I made arrangements. Caine will stay with Gabriel. Alexei already gave me his word he’d take him.”

Aurora and Alexei would care for him as if Gabriel was their own.

Sasha’s jaw tightened. He didn’t agree with my decision. He wouldn’t understand it until he found his own woman.

“Going home without her body isn’t an option,” I told him.

“What is it with all of you going all crazy stupid over your women,” he muttered, then he flashed me a grin. “You better be back. Because our boat is not leaving without you.”

I pulled another detonator out, then pushed it against the door. Sasha hustled out with Alexei and the women, urging them towards the entrance. As the last one left the room, the explosion blasted and shook the walls of the building.

I was running out of time. We might end up buried here if I had to use one more detonator. As the dust settled, I could see the path down another hallway. Darker. More ominous.

I reloaded my magazine, then stepped through the debris and stones. The moment I stepped into the space, I could see there are doors on each side of the wall. The cold stone hallway was a lot bigger on this side, every so often opening to a wider space where more cells were housed.

Some empty cells. Others were full of dead bodies. Lifeless eyes of young women. Lives cut short.

“Reina?” I roared. I could feel the numbness filling me, the old fear of losing something precious growing with each step I took. Then I reached another set of stairs. Leading further down into the dirt.

Into hell.

How fucking appropriate!

I took the spiraling steps, taking me further and further down into the pits of darkness and hell. The dust and mold seemed heavier down here. The scent of blood overpowered all other smells.

It was when I reached the bottom step that I finally saw her.

My black heart stopped beating.

All the air released from my lungs in a rush. It was right there and then that I knew, I was nothing without her. I couldn't live without her. I'd burn down this motherfucking world for her.

She was chained, facing the wall, her platinum blonde hair barely recognizable. Dirt and blood stained it now. That hair that usually shined like platinum gold hung loosely down her back, parts of it stuck against her skin, hiding some of her whipped and bloodied back.

The pain that slashed through me was as deep as those whip marks on her back.

Please, don't let me lose her, I prayed for the first time in a long time to all the Saints my mamma kept praying to.

My wife hung, spread eagle, with her arms and legs chained, her clothes shredded to unrecognizable rags. Her pale skin was a canvas of dirt, bruises, and blood. Her head hung loose, like that of a broken angel.

Her arms, back, and legs were covered in gashes, and at this moment I felt them as if they were my own. I fucking wished they were so she'd be spared. She hadn't moved.

Her body was deathly still. Too motionless.

I closed the distance between us.

"Reina." I didn't feel my mouth move, but her name left my mouth over and over again. I undid one chain, her frail body falling into me. "Hang on, Reina. I'm taking you home."

Her body was cold. Too cold. I rushed undoing her other arm. Her skin was clammy, her eyes closed and her beautiful face heart-wrenchingly bruised. I gritted my teeth, a combination of fear and rage slithering through my veins.

I brought my face to hers, dread filling my chest. Her lips were blue. Pale blue. The only color on her was that of blood and purple cuts.

A soft gasp sounded. *Hers*. Like a flicker of light in the darkness of hell, I latched on to it. It was the best sound I

had ever heard. She wasn’t dead. I could feel the faint rising and falling of her chest. Keeping her head lifted with one hand, I pressed my mouth on her forehead.

“Just don’t fucking die on me,” I rasped, my voice shaking. “Please, Reina. Don’t die.”

Her eyes fluttered open, the dullness of her blues hitting me right in the chest.

“M-my diablo.” Her voice cracked and a single tear rolled down her face full of bruises. “You came.”

“Always.” Fuck. My throat squeezed and my heart bled. The Devil never cried but for her, I might. “I’ll always come for you, Reina. What's a diablo without his queen?”

Her eyes fluttered shut, then a fit of coughs followed, shaking her body. I shot the chains holding her legs hostage, disintegrating it, and her body jerked. I wrapped my arms around her, not letting her fall.

Her fragile body hit my chest and I swore my heart broke at that moment. Seeing the state of her body. She was limp in my arms. She lost consciousness, probably looking for reprieve in oblivion.

She should have never experienced this. I should have protected her better.

I was too wrapped up in taking care of her when a strong arm wrapped around my neck from behind, crushing my windpipe. My wife’s unconscious body slipped from my grip, hitting the floor.

Fuck.

“You’ll never have her.” I recognized the voice. Santiago Tijuana. His grip tightened around my throat. “She screamed for you. Cried for you. Begged for you.”

I didn’t listen to his words. They’d fuck me up. I just reacted. I had to get Sailor out of here.

“She’s something, your whore,” he taunted. “That mouth on her.”

A wave of red filled my vision, fury feeding my rage. I wanted to tear him limb from fucking limb. Sailor’s limp

body laid immobile, her eyes shut, and her once platinum blonde hair now covered in red. Like my rage.

“I was going to sink my dick into her today but you had to show up,” he seethed. “I was going to take that privileged pussy for a test drive, you fuck. Because she’s mine.”

I pulled my arm forward, then sunk a hard elbow in his ribs. Again and again. Santiago yelped, the fucking coward trying to pull away. I jerked my elbow again and hit with all my force. Electricity shot through my elbow, and I relished in his yelp of pain as his ribs were crushed under the force of the impact.

“She’ll never be yours,” I spat out, his grip still too tight on my neck.

I reached into my front pocket and pulled out my switchblade. At that same time I pushed the button, I swung around my arm, then pushed the knife into his neck.

A tortured hiss left his lips and I spun around, seeing the miserable piece of shit holding his neck, attempting to stop the bleeding. If I had time, I’d heal him, only to fucking slice him again. So he’d get a taste of his own medicine.

But I had no time to waste. My reina needed me. She was hurt and my priority. So I pulled out my gun, aimed it at his forehead and pulled the trigger. Six times. So if anyone found his sorry ass, they’d know the devil had found him.

Sliding my jacket off my shoulder, I threw it around my wife’s half-naked body, then lifted her into my arms. I headed back for the staircase and found my way back the same way I arrived, Sailor’s frail body in my arms wheezing every so often.

“Stay with me, Reina,” I begged. I didn’t give a fuck how I sounded. She was all that mattered to me. She pressed her face into my chest, her body shaking.

The way out seemed a lot longer than the way in. I was eager to get us out of here. I came too far to lose her.

Gabriel needed her. I fucking needed her.

We stepped out in the courtyard not a moment too soon. Another explosion detonated, deafening me and sending rocks flying through the air.

“Raphael!” Sasha shouted, reaching me. The fucker was waiting, despite the fact I told him to fucking leave. It was what made him a good man. A good friend. “You crazy bastard. I thought you were lost.” His eyes lowered to Sailor in my arms and fury covered his expression. “Jesus fucking Christ.”

Sailor was out cold, which was probably better. “We have to move,” I told him.

Following behind him, we headed back to the boats. Women filled every single one of them.

“Where in the fuck are we going to put them all?” Diego asked, eyeing Sailor’s bruised face. I couldn’t put her down. I needed to feel her faint heartbeat, feel her breathe or I’d lose my shit.

“How many women?” I asked, feeling my own fatigue coming over me.

“About fifty.” It was Nico who answered.

While still holding Sailor, I pulled out my phone with my other hand and dialed Cassio. He owed me a few favors. And he was a friend. He answered on the first ring.

“Cassio, we have about fifty women. Can you arrange housing?”

“Yes.” No questions asked. “Do you need a pick up?”

My eyes roamed over the boats that would take us to my yacht, which in turn would take us back to my island.

“My island.”

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Chapter Fifty-One

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SAILOR

Two weeks.

I floated through a dream for two weeks. The angel Anya whispered words of comfort. The devil Father told me to go. My diablo begged me to stay. Anya whispered words of comfort, and a reminder of my promise.

I loved my sister. She had never failed me. She was my mother, father, and sibling. She was my everything.

Until she wasn't.

I didn't know when the devil with blue eyes and golden skin became my heart and soul. My everything. Was it eight years ago when we first danced? Was it when he saved me from the cruel man in the hallway?

Or was it when he came for Gabriel and me?

Sometime during all those years, Diablo came back for me. It turned out, I was waiting for him all along.

But he betrayed me.

I shifted on the bed, the lingering ache in every single muscle reminding me of what had happened. I wanted to forget. I didn't want to feel.

It had been two weeks since Raphael came for me. Or so I'd been told.

I’d been in and out of consciousness. Sometimes I’d hear Gabriel’s voice. He’d hug me and whisper that everything would be okay. The words that Anya would tenderly whisper when I was scared.

My throat squeezed so hard, I was certain I would suffocate. Yet, my heart kept beating. So I kept my eyes shut - in shame and determination to forget.

Everything and everyone.

Whispers.

Hushed tones. The scent of *Aguardiente*. A presence so achingly familiar that my eyelids fluttered open.

Moonlight highlighted the outline of a man. A dark, tall figure. My devil.

“You have to let her go.” I recognized the female voice. Aurora’s. “I know her. She’ll want space.”

“Where in the fuck is your man?” Raphael’s voice sounded tired. Almost resigned.

“He’s right outside,” Aurora hissed. “I want to take her home. Willow and I will take care of her.”

I could taste the animosity in the air. His. Hers. “You touch my wife, and you won’t live-.”

“You better think twice before you finish that statement.” The air turned arctic. I recognized the voice of Alexei Nikolaev. Things were bad, but I couldn’t find the strength to care.

“Why don’t we all calm down?” Raphael’s sister, Isabella, chimed in. “Sailor is Raphael’s wife. She’s been through hell, let her rest. Then they’ll talk and decide what’s best for them.”

“Going away is best for her,” Aurora claimed. She was wrong, but then she was right. “I’ve been listening to her

scream at night for three fucking weeks. She's *not* getting better. She's dying. Not eating. Not sleeping."

"I'll make her better." Raphael's voice reflected barely contained fury.

"She's been through hell," Aurora hissed. "I'm not saying she'd leave you for good. But she has to come to terms. She never came to terms with her sister's death. She kept going. For Gabriel's sake. It's time she takes care of herself. She needs to heal."

"She'll heal with me." I could hear the stubbornness in Raphael's voice. Damn it, I was so fucking tired. Three weeks of sleep wasn't enough. I felt like there were bricks sitting on my chest, making it hard to breathe.

I shifted on the bed and everyone stilled. I turned my back to them before the mattress dipped right beside me.

"Everyone leave." An order. A demand.

Feet shuffling.

Click.

I was alone with the devil.

The silence was heavy. History and truth were finally out. Stars flickered in the darkness, hinting at its beauty. But I was too blind. My heart bled too heavily, coloring the darkness with the crimson red colors of our pasts.

"Don't shut me out," he rasped, his voice rough. "Talk to me."

"You lied." An accusation. A betrayal. "You knew Anya was my half-sister. You knew about the agreement. You tried to buy me from my father."

His breathing paused. His face moved closer, his rough palms cupped my face, then his nose brushed against mine.

"And I'd lie a thousand times more, just to keep you with me."

It was appropriate. My diablo didn't feel regret. No sorrow. No pain. No fear. While I fucking felt it all.

"Is he dead?" I asked instead, my voice like sandpaper against my windpipe.

“Santiago Tijuana is dead.” My relief. His fury. I could taste it; it was a living, breathing thing traveling through the air. “Your father is next.”

I waited for guilt to come. It didn’t. If anything, there was a disappointment that my father wasn’t dead.

“My mother too,” I said dully.

She let him hurt Anya. She let him come after Gabriel. She was just as guilty, and I had no more forgiveness left in me. Not for them; not for me.

They’d get off easy. Anya suffered for twenty-two years. Their deaths would be swift.

Another pause. “I’ll take care of it. For you, Reina, I’d cover the streets in blood.”

When I said nothing else, he stood up and headed for the door. Soft light flooded into the room as he opened it.

He looked over his shoulder, his eyes met mine.

“I love you, Reina,” he said softly. Three little words that should mean the entire world. Yet, now they were tainted with bitterness and lies. “It only took a single dance to fall in love with you. Not even my dying breath will end it.”

One devil. Two hearts. Three souls.

Raphael. Me. Gabriel.

“I want to go.”

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Chapter Fifty-Two

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SAILOR

Three weeks and two days since I was rescued. Two days since I told my devil I wanted to go.

Aurora visited, assuring me I was safe. Isabella did too. Gabriel just hugged me and talked about normal things. I knew I wasn't in that basement anymore. But my mind kept drifting to it. Going back to that dark place.

Nightmares plagued me. I'd wake up screaming, hearing Santiago's voice. Sometimes my father's.

But Raphael was always there to pull me back. My savior and my captor.

We hadn't spoken since I told him I wanted to leave. Not that we talked much since he rescued me. But my mind was made up. I had to leave, heal on my own terms. Figure out where to go from here.

My terrors affected Gabriel. I could see it in his eyes. They even tore at my husband. Dark shadows lingered under his eyes. I heard whispers about the devil's temper from the staff when they came to clean the room and they thought I was sleeping.

"I have to go," I rasped to my reflection, staring back at me.

Sitting on the black toilet seat in Raphael's black marble luxury bathroom, I listened to the shower running,

watching as the water rolled over the slick marble.

Gabriel visited earlier then left for school. Raphael enrolled him into a school he used to attend as a boy. It was a good move. Gabriel needed stability, a routine. Goals.

I didn’t know what my goals were anymore.

Aimless. Stagnant.

That was how I felt. Stuck in a fog, somewhere between a nightmare and a dream.

The skin on my back itched. The doctor said it was healing well. No infection. There shouldn’t be lifelong scars.

But showers hurt. They were painful and soothing at the same time. Except, it took courage I lacked to push myself under the water.

So I just sat there, in my panties and tank top, staring at the way the water splashed against the marble tile wall and trickled down, creating raindrops. My body was still a canvas of bruises and cuts.

My eyes met my reflection in the mirror again.

I looked the same, but I couldn’t recognize myself. As if seeing through a stranger's eyes. Anya and I looked nothing alike. She had ebony black hair and brown eyes. I guess like her father. I never pondered on our physical differences, because we were so much alike on the inside. But now that I stared at my reflection, I could see Anya in my eyes.

The bathroom door opened and my gaze flickered up to find Raphael watching me. He was dressed in his black three-piece-suit, his holster outline clearly visible. A handsome and charismatic devil, just like on the first night we met.

“Are you okay?”

His eyes traveled around the bathroom, as if he thought he’d find someone here before returning his attention back to me.

He took two steps and lowered down on his one knee. “Reina, are you hurting?”

Yes. No. I sighed tiredly. “I don’t know.”

His eyes darted to the shower, then back to me. “Do you want to take a shower?”

I lowered my gaze. My body was a mess. Shame filled me and tears burned my eyes. I swallowed hard, desperate to hold the tears at bay while my lower lip quivered.

Raphael’s hand gently took my chin between his fingers. “Let me help you, Reina.”

Our gazes held. The love he gave was like writing on a fogged window, but the steam from the hot shower wiped it out. He said he loved me. I couldn’t say it back. I felt dirty. *Broken.*

“Is it okay if I take your clothes off?” His words were soft as a whisper.

I swallowed and opened my mouth to give permission. I couldn’t find my voice so I just nodded. Gently he helped me up and I stood like a child, my gaze never wavering from him.

He reached around me, his big hand feather light against my skin and all the while, his eyes remained on my face. As if he waited for panic to kick in. Gripping the hem of my tank top, he pulled it gently over my head and discarded it on the floor. He hooked his fingers in my panties and gently slid them down my legs.

He removed his tie, then his jacket followed. Panic flickered in my chest. My chest squeezed. Oxygen couldn’t find its way into my lungs. Tremors rolled down my body.

“I’ll leave my clothes on, Reina,” he quickly assured and my eyes found his, looking for truth in them. “I’m just going to get rid of the jacket, vest, my holster and shoes. Okay?”

I swallowed hard. Another nod.

His holster followed, then he kicked off his shoes and socks.

He gently nudged me into the shower, both of us stepping under the spray of it together.

“Tell me if it hurts,” he rasped, reaching for a cloth and bodywash. “You can hit me too. Hard.”

My lips tugged up. It was as if I gave him the biggest gift, because light flickered in his eyes. Our gazes locked, and it was as if he held his breath. But words failed me.

“Ready?” he asked softly.

“Yes,” I answered softly, my voice barely a whisper.

He started to wash my body, the primrose scent filling the luxurious shower. He lathered every inch of my body, softly and so gently, it almost brought tears to my eyes.

He lowered down to his knees, washing my left foot, then my right foot. Then he rose to his full height, and washed my hair. He poured shampoo into his palms, then slowly rubbed it into my hair, his touch feather light.

Then he rinsed it off, and repeated the process with the conditioner.

When he was done, he brushed his mouth against my forehead, then turned off the water and reached for the large, plush towel, patted my body dry and then wrapped it around me. He did the same process with my hair, patting it dry.

“Good?” he asked, his voice thick with emotions. Not sure what kind and I didn’t dare to ask.

“Thank you.”

A terse nod. We stepped out of the shower together, water dripping off his clothes. “You’re going to get sick,” I murmured.

His gaze followed down his body, then came back to me. “Are you okay if I take my clothes off?”

“Sure.”

His movements were efficient and quick as he stripped out of his clothes. For a few moments, he disappeared into the bedroom, leaving the door open. I watched him head to the closet, digging out a change of clothes. I watched his

muscles shift as he changed into a dry pair of boxers and pulled a pair of pajama pants on.

When he turned around, there was a guarded expression on his face as our gazes locked, the air thick between us. The dangerous energy buzzed in the air. Raphael was never the one to hide his ruthlessness.

He had his title tattooed on his hand for Christ's sake.

But he hid it now. He returned to the bathroom.

"Thank you." *For saving me. For not giving up on me. For loving me.*

He took five steps back towards me, his tall frame towering over me. His gaze burned a hole through me, seeing my heart. *Bleeding. Damaged.*

He leaned back against the counter, my body immobile as I watched the familiar ink marking his upper torso. He was seemingly relaxed, both of his hands curled over the edge of the marble countertop. But his knuckles were white. His fingers clutched the marble, and I feared he'd crack it.

But it was his wedding band that glittered against the light that caught my eye.

"Don't leave me, Reina." His dark voice was laced with desperation. "Tell me what you want, what you need. You can have it all, anything. Everything. Just don't leave me."

I couldn't find my words. Emotions tangled my tongue and burned through my soul. And it hurt so fucking bad that I thought a hand wrapped around my throat and choked me.

"I want to die." The shameful admission slipped through my lips.

A heavy pause filled the air, suffocating both of us.

"No."

I sucked in a harsh breath and my eyes flickered to his. His hands clenched briefly, then his large hand came over mine and pulled me into him. "No, Reina. You don't want to die. You know why?"

He pressed my body against his hard one, his hands holding on to me. As if he was scared I'd leave him now.

"Why?"

"Because you're strong." His lips skimmed over my forehead. "Because you're mine and I'm yours. Because Gabriel loves you. Because I love you. You're my reason for living. I've waited for you my entire life. I found you for a moment and then I lost you for eight years. Now that I have you, I can't let you go." His mouth was on my neck now. "Please don't ask me to let you go."

I tilted my head, feeling the old desire flickering to life.

Despite it all, I still wanted him.

"Live for me." Desperation laced his every word. His mouth latched on to my skin, nipping, then licking it, only to kiss it with reverence and gentleness. A tear rolled down my cheek. "Reina, live for me and Gabriel. For our family."

I shook my head sadly.

"You need to let me go," I whispered, hating that I was breaking his heart. "Gabriel needs you. I'll stay close by, but I need time."

"When I went to your parents," he started, his arms tightening around me, "I threatened them that if they attempted anything, I'd kill them. Then I offered to buy out his contract with that Tijuana scum, to ensure another layer of protection." His reasoning made sense. I couldn't hold that against him. After everything, it seemed like a minor detail. "When he refused, I went for the agreement he violated eight years ago. I wasn't trying to buy you. I want your love given freely. Not bought."

My blood pulsed in my ears. My hands were clammy. Fear filled me. Darkness danced between us - his, mine, ours.

The truth was that I felt safe in his darkness. Maybe it was exactly that which scared me even more.

"You kept it from me," I rasped. "I told you about seeing your father rape Anya. Why didn't you tell me?"

“You hurt just talking about it.” I could see the truth in his eyes, but it didn’t make me feel any better. “I didn’t want to cause you more pain.”

It made sense. Leaving ghosts resting in the past. Except now I had new ghosts, and I couldn’t just hide from them under the bed.

“I *need* to go,” I whispered softly, hating that I was hurting him. “I need time alone. Gabriel can stay with you. He needs stability and a good night’s sleep. It’s something I can’t give him now.”

Something conflicted flared in his eyes. Something too close to his own panic. I didn’t like seeing it. My gaze met his, my lungs grew tight. I just knew if I swept this fear under the rug, it’d come haunting. And it wouldn’t just be me paying the price.

“My mother killed herself.” His words shattered the air. I sought out his face at the abrupt change. “My father wasn’t good to her. The last time he forced himself on her, she couldn’t take it any longer. A switch was flipped and there was no going back. I wasn’t there in time to save her. She jumped off the balcony right in front of me.” I watched his Adam apple move as he swallowed hard. “I couldn’t save her.”

The pressure in my chest grew heavy. But not for me, it was for him. The pain in his voice brought a rush of tears to my eyes, and I wrapped my arms around him and I realized the selfishness of my earlier statement.

“Don’t leave me, Sailor.” Something rough and untamed vibrated through the air, the emotion in his words coming dangerously close to panic. “I want to save you. Save us.”

I swallowed, now understanding why my earlier words that I wanted to die affected him so. My heart was breaking for the second time this month but this time it was for him. If I stayed, I’d end up in a hole there was no coming back from. If I stayed, I’d pull him and Gabriel into an abyss.

I had clung to Anya my entire life. Until she was gone. Then it was Gabriel. I kept going for him and for the promise I kept. And now Raphael.

And all the while, I had let everyone suffer so I wouldn't. If I kept away, my father would leave them alone. He'd come for me. I knew it as well as my next breath.

He'd come for me, and when he did, I didn't want Raphael nor Gabriel anywhere near me.

My gaze met my husband's and I took a shallow breath.

"I'm sorry."

I leaned forward, pressing my mouth to his.

Then I held on to him, with the same raw desperation I heard in his voice.

For just a bit longer.

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Chapter Fifty-Three

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RAPHAEL

I let her go.

It has been twenty-seven days, six hundred and forty-eight hours, and thirty-eight thousand, eight hundred and eighty minutes since I dropped her off at my penthouse in Miami. Two of my most trusted men guarded the front door. I had a team of fifty men guarding the building and stalking her whenever she went anywhere.

And I still worried about her. Every goddamn second of the day.

My jaw tightened, my molars grinding hard as I walked away from her and my fucking eyes burned. *Dios mío!* Suddenly, I was a fucking pussy, weeping for a woman. But she wasn't just any woman. She was my wife.

I got updates daily. She took up self-defense classes. She even went to a gun range and practiced shooting. She was good to begin with but she muttered to her bodyguard she wanted to be even better. *Invincible.*

The problem was that none of us were invincible, and she'd have to come to terms with it.

Either way, I knew what she ate, what she wore, where she went, and how badly she screamed at night. The latter tore at me. I wanted to comfort her, assure her I'd do a better job and protect her.

I fucking failed her.

So here I was. I let her go and hoped she'd find her way back to me. Unfortunately with each day that passed, that hope dimmed. I hadn't shaved in days and the only reason I hadn't been nursing a bottle of Aguardiente was because of Gabriel.

We agreed he'd split his time between her place and the island. He'd go to her penthouse after school and they'd work through homework together, play with Bruno, and she'd cook him dinner. *Or burn it,* Gabriel joked. Then they'd walk down the beach with Bruno at their feet. The little French bulldog became her only constant companion.

Despite the fact Sailor hated letting Gabriel go each evening when my driver went to pick him up, she refused to let him spend the night. She didn't need to say why. Her nightmares.

I leaned back in my chair, my eyes traveling around the table. I cracked my knuckles. Then cracked them again. The restlessness ghosted under my skin and my patience was running paper thin.

Each day that passed without Sailor became worse and worse. She needed space. I needed *her*. In my bed, in my home. Fuck, just with me. I didn't know how I'd get through another fucking day without her, never mind another month.

Here I sat in front of three men from the Mexican cartel, and I couldn't stop thinking about my wife. If a bullet lodged itself in my head, I'd fucking deserve it. You just didn't do business with the cartel while fantasizing about a woman.

"We could start a partner—"

"I'm not interested in any partnership." I cut the man off, my voice impassive. "Anything else? Or do you want to talk more shit?"

Tension crept through the air and the Mexican drug lord flashed me a knowing grin. "It looks like Señor needs a

woman to warm his bed," he started. *Oh he did not!* "I have a supply of women. You take your pick."

"I'm married," I snapped. "And the next time you offer a woman or even hint at bringing a trafficked woman onto my territory, I'll burn your whole fucking business to the ground. Understood?"

His tanned skin turned blotchy and he shot up from his spot, then left the room, slamming the door behind him.

His men followed and with the meeting concluded, my eyes darted over the Atlantic Ocean, the clear aqua colors reminding me of Sailor's eyes.

My men left with the rest of them, leaving me alone with Caine. He flicked a hesitant look my way.

"What?" I barked. Yes, my temper has had a short fuse these days.

"Listen, Raphael," he said from the seat beside me, "you might have to consider that she's not coming back."

Never.

I'd find a way to bring her back to me. I was the devil. I'd find a way. I'd find a way to steal her soul, her heart, and her body. Somehow.

"You need to get laid," he added.

"I'll get laid when my wife is ready," I gritted.

Caine was right though. When I abstained from sex, my temper flared easier and people died faster. Not that they didn't deserve it.

But I refused to find release with anyone else. It would either be my wife or nobody else.

Shaking his head, he cleared out of the room and silence filled my office. Abstinence wasn't my only problem. It was also the fact that I searched high and low for Sailor's parents. The cowards were hiding. I couldn't wait to get my fucking hands on them and rip them apart, limb from limb.

For what they'd done to my wife. For trying to take her from me. For coming after her, after I warned them that

she was mine. They got their fair warning. They didn't heed it. Now they'd learn what it meant to cross me.

It had been the highlight of my fucking month. It kept me going - to end them for my wife's sake. So she'd find peace. She had to heal, and she couldn't do it with those two bastards roaming this Earth.

All the moments with Sailor replayed on a loop in my mind. From the moment I met her eight years ago until I dropped her off in the penthouse. She looked so frail, so goddamn vulnerable with that broken look in her eyes that it actually hurt to walk away.

She needed space. Time to heal. She needed something, but it wasn't me.

But I'd never give her up.

Because for a time, no matter how short, I had a family and now it was gone. Gabriel tried so hard to be strong, but he worried too. No kid should have to worry so much. I had tried to distract him. We visited the zoo together, went fishing, even went to church. I figured it wouldn't hurt.

So for the first time since I was a kid, I went to church for something other than a funeral. We sat in pews and listened to the service as we sat in silence. And the whole time I wondered what Sailor would say since her devil was in church. The old Sailor would have snickered and told me it'd burn down.

Gabriel asked me to help him with a prayer so I reached far back into the memory of the prayer my mother taught me. In Spanish. So we prayed together.

For Sailor to come back to us.

As if Gabriel heard my thoughts, he strode into my office with a backpack over his shoulder.

"Hey, Raphael."

I lifted my head to find him still standing by the door.

"Hey, *hermano*." I loved calling him brother in Spanish. I stood up from my spot and strode over to him. "How was

school?” *How is your mom?* I couldn’t bring myself to ask the latter. It wasn’t right.

“Great.” I smiled at his enthusiasm. “Mom came for lunch duty, so we hung out most of the day.”

I didn’t ask how she was doing. I couldn’t. I feared he’d say she was happy. Happiest she’d ever been and the fragile bonds we started to build would tear into shreds.

“What was for lunch?” I asked him instead, trying to get more information out of him.

Like a pathetic loser. Fucking wonderful. Forty years old and I had finally turned into some love-struck fool.

I fucking hated that my wife needed space. My head understood it, but my heart fucking refused to allow it. It looked for any kind of excuse or reason to find my way back to the apartment where she was. I used to stay there when I’d do business in the city, but I told her I’d give her space.

“Pizza,” he grinned. “Mom bought pizza for the whole school. She said it was courtesy of her ‘*butt-loaded’* husband. The teachers gave her weird looks. I think Mom was going for the shock effect.”

For the first time since Sailor’s kidnapping, my lips tugged up.

“She likes to shock people, huh?”

He shrugged. “Sometimes. Mrs. Rush reprimanded her about using the ‘butt-loaded’ word in front of the kids. So Mom called you a mobster-loaded husband.”

I shook my head. At least her spirit was coming back. I’d pay good money to see that exchange between her and the teachers of St. Maria Catholic School.

“Hey, Raph.” The hesitance in Gabriel’s voice shot an alert through me and I focused my attention on him.

“Yeah?”

“Do you think she’ll come back to us?” he asked. “To the island?”

Fuck! I hoped so. Otherwise, it’d be a sad life for me.

“I don’t know, buddy,” I told him honestly. “But I want you to know, this thing with your mom and me, it’s my fault.”

“That’s funny,” he muttered. “Because Mom says it’s her fault.”

I straightened up. “It’s not her fault,” I protested. “She’s been through a lot.”

Gabriel’s expression turned serious. “I know. But it’s not your fault either.”

Damn, the kid was too sharp and had a good heart. Like Sailor.

A long pause followed.

“Was your dad a good man?” The fact he called him *my* father, not *our* father didn’t escape me. His question surprised me a bit. It came out of nowhere. But then, it was to be anticipated considering my father was well known in Miami. The moment Gabriel started attending school here, it was to be anticipated he’d hear the rumors about our father.

“No, he wasn’t a good man.” There was no sense in sugar coating it. “But you are. We are not our father.”

I wouldn’t have blamed anyone for keeping a kid away from my father. Isabella’s mother kept her hidden and my half-sister was tons better for it. Although she found her way back into the underworld despite all odds.

The same was true with Gabriel.

He nodded. “I think Mom’s dad wasn’t a good man either.” I held my brother’s gaze, the questions in them clear. He wanted an explanation, but I couldn’t tell him everything. It was something Sailor and I would have to do together. When he was much older. I agreed with her, we’d want to preserve his innocence for as long as possible. “I think it’s the reason she doesn’t like to sleep in the dark.”

I wished I could have spared Sailor all her pain, but then the two of us would have never crossed paths. We were so

different but it was our past experiences that connected us and fuck, I couldn’t imagine my life without her.

Two hours later, I was parked across the street from my old apartment.

My men gave me an update on her activities. This was the time she took walks down the beach. Gabriel let it slip that she’d planned to still walk today. So here I was, like a stalker watching for any sign of my wife.

I stared down at the building, my eyes locked on the only door that led from the building directly to the beach.

Yes, I knew I had agreed to give her time. I just needed a glimpse of her to keep me going. The obsession with my wife made it hard to think clearly. To sleep. To live.

How in the fuck would I survive without her if she decided not to come back?

I couldn’t even think about it.

Catching blonde hair, the color of fresh snow, from the corner of my eyes, I stilled.

It’s her.

Wearing white, cropped leggings and a black t-shirt that barely covered that gorgeous ass, I couldn’t tear my gaze from the beautiful sight. It was another thing I noticed. She wore plain colors lately. White, black, gray. I was certain it had something to do with her moods.

A few passersby greeted her and she acknowledged them with a nod, but her gaze never lingered on them as she rushed past them.

She made her way through the gate, slipping her shoes off, and I had mere seconds before she’d disappear from my sight. And just like a dog, I was out of the car and following behind her.

I was halfway across the street, passing the men I assigned to watch her. The breeze swept across the beach, carrying her scent with it.

Just another glimpse.

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Chapter Fifty-Four

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SAILOR

A wave of awareness rushed from my nape down my spine.

Someone was behind me. And it wasn't the bodyguards. Raphael's men somehow mastered blending into nothing so I was barely aware of them.

I chewed on my bottom lip as I pondered how to discreetly glance behind me and a flicker of anxiety slowly grew into a full-blown panic attack.

My lungs tightened, constricting.

I took a deep breath then another. Panic twisted in my chest. I couldn't get enough oxygen into my lungs.

"Reina."

My eyes snapped in the direction of the voice. *Raphael.*

"My devil."

The words traveled on the breeze. I hadn't felt my mouth move, but they must have because I heard my whisper in the wind.

"Yes, your diablo." His voice was soft. Two strides and his hands wrapped around me. I was pressed against his warm body, inhaling his scent deep into my lungs.

Twenty-seven days.

I missed him. Nightmares came, but so did my devil. He'd save me every single time. Just like now. I thought it'd

be easier not to be around him. It wasn't. I missed him and Gabriel every second of the day and night. I'd wake up, I'd roam the empty penthouse and end up finding Bruno. I loved our puppy, but he couldn't fill the void I felt without Gabriel and Raphael.

Weekends, however, were the worst. The loneliness was the heaviest then. I'd had way too many FaceTime calls with Aurora and Willow. They both wanted to visit and it took a lot of convincing to stop them from coming.

Yet, it was my husband who I craved every single day.

I buried my face into his chest and wrapped my hands around his waist. A rough noise sounded deep in his chest and he pulled me even closer to him.

"Breathe, Reina."

He ran a hand through my hair and then down my back. He murmured soft words in Spanish and I found them soothing. Soon, my heart rate slowed and my breathing evened out, my arms around his waist.

Slowly the sound of waves came back into focus. Human voices laughing. The buzzing of the motor boats. Birds.

He smelled so good. Like a favorite blanket that you drew comfort from. Or maybe like the devil that you absolutely needed.

His fingers laced through my hair and he gently tugged on it, forcing me to meet his eyes. His unblinking stare found mine, consuming me.

God, I loved his closeness. He was warm and his muscles hard against me, and he smelled just as I remembered. A warm licorice scent and all man. My man.

Tension rolled through him, although his hands offered comfort. I knew it was wrong to take the offered comfort. It wasn't fair to him, but I needed him so much right now.

"It's okay," he whispered against my hair. "Nobody will ever hurt you again."

My fingers held on to the hem of his suit jacket. Like he was my life raft.

The truth was that I feared at any given moment my father would show up and take me again. Give me to someone else and this time Raphael wouldn't find me.

I hated how vulnerable I felt. I hated even more how weak it made me feel. Aurora was strong. She was a badass and after what she lived through, she made herself the strongest she could possibly be. I didn't.

I clung to Anya my entire life. Then she was gone and I clung to the baby she left behind. Yes, I nurtured him. Yes, I took care of him. But I didn't make myself strong and invincible to fight off people like my father.

And now… I clung to Raphael, but I didn't want to be that clingy woman that needed rescuing. At others' expense.

"I can't do this," I whimpered. "Every second of the day, I expect *him* to be here. When Gabriel visits, I worry about Father coming so much that I can barely breathe."

He stilled, something dark flickering in his gaze.

"That cabrón is hiding," he hissed. "He won't come for you, but I'll find him. I promise you, Reina. He won't come near you. Ever again."

The hint of vehemence vibrated through his every word, and I believed him. His darkness surrounded me in a protective bubble. Who would have ever thought that the devil would be my savior?

"Look at me, Sailor." His fingers came to my chin and lifted it so our gazes met. "*El amor todo lo puede.*" Love can do it all. His soft words in Spanish had my heart fluttering.

"You and I will end your parents," he vowed. "I'd rather die than let anyone hurt you or Gabriel."

I swallowed hard, a lone tear rolling down my cheek. That was exactly the problem. I didn't want him to die. He swept it away with his thumb, then ran it over my bottom lip. My tongue swept over it, licking the taste and sweeping over his finger.

His gaze dropped to my lips, that dark desire I came to know so well, lingering deep in those blues. There was possessive heat sizzling in his eyes, offering to consume me.

And I'd let him.

I came to a realization that the devil's colors weren't red. They were blue - the color of his eyes.

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Chapter Fifty-Five

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SAILOR

Raphael and I walked back from the beach, hand in hand.

I didn't want to put distance between us. His strength and warmth soaked into my bones, and I found comfort in his touch.

As we stepped into the elevator to take us to the penthouse, I remained close to him. His hands came to my hips and pulled me closer. It wasn't sexual, but more possessive. Like he needed to feel me close to him as much as I needed to feel him close to me.

My heart drummed. My blood burned through my veins. And my skin buzzed with the need. But I wasn't ready. I knew it deep down in my heart.

Too many nightmares. Too many questions. Too many things left unresolved.

I was lucky that Raphael came when he did. Santiago Tijuana might not have raped me, but he was close to breaking me. The damage, mental more so than physical, lingered deep in my mind and my soul.

The elevator dinged, signaling we were on the top floor and Raphael pressed his palm against the security device. It opened directly to my floor, two of Raphael's men standing in the hallway.

A brief acknowledgement and the two of us proceeded into the penthouse through another secured door that only Raphael's and my palm opened.

The lock clicked and Raphael opened the door for me.

I walked through the door and the large view of Miami's crystal blue water stretched through the windows that covered the entire south wall. The view got me every single time. It was breathtaking.

"You sure know how to pick homes with the most gorgeous views," I murmured, breaking the silence.

There was a tremor to my fingers, nervous energy buzzing through my veins.

"Umm, want something to drink?" I offered. This was his home so it felt odd playing hostess.

"Sailor, don't be nervous." Raphael's voice came from behind me, but not too close, as if he sensed I needed space.

Taking a deep breath, I slowly turned around and faced him. I still thought him to be the most handsome devil I had ever met.

"I'm not nervous," I muttered. His eyes lowered to my hand, twisting and gripping my wrist so hard that my knuckles turned white. "Okay, maybe a bit," I admitted.

"We're just talking," he assured. "Think of it as a visit."

It was damn stupid that I needed his reassurance. It wasn't that I didn't want him. I really did. Except that fear still lingered somewhere deep down and I couldn't shake it off.

"Water then?" I offered. "I don't think there is any alcohol."

Despite the fact I'd been here almost a month, it wasn't a home. Not without Gabriel and Raphael here. So it had become just a place to linger in until I could come to terms with everything that had happened.

In that basement. With all the secrets that lingered between us. And my fear that somehow Gabriel or Raphael

would be caught up in this hateful relationship with my parents.

“Water is fine.”

“Please, sit down.” It was his place after all. He’d unbuttoned his suit jacket, showing his black vest that hugged his flat stomach and holster. I watched his hand move gracefully, the ink on his hand seductive as he sat down on the couch.

Diablo.

Maybe it was precisely that which made me feel safe around him. The fact that he wore his ruthlessness like a badge of honor. He was strong and brave; I was not. He was all hard edges; I wasn’t.

Maybe it was the fact that we were so different that tugged on my invisible strings and attracted me to him.

I headed to the open kitchen, and I could feel his gaze on me the entire time as I moved around it. I grabbed the bottled water out of the fridge and glass out of the cabinet, then poured him a glass.

Heading out of the kitchen, I put the glass next to him. For a fraction of a moment, I debated where to sit. Next to him? Opposite of him? Remain standing?

Then I just opted for the seat next to him.

“How are you doing, Reina?” Every time I heard the deep sound of his voice my heart stilled, then melted just a little. I loved hearing his voice. I loved hearing his endearment for me.

“Do you call anyone else by that name?” I asked randomly.

“What name?”

“Reina.”

“No, just you,” he said. Something tired lingered behind his eyes. “There is only one of you. You’re the only one for me.”

I met his gaze and it grabbed at my heart, just like every time. A month could change so much or not enough.

The invisible scars became a permanent part of me. Nightmares lingered. I didn’t know how to get rid of them. I wanted to be saved but then I also didn't. The reminder that I couldn’t be weak.

I wasn’t strong like Anya and Aurora. It turned out I always searched for a savior. Yet, the truth Raphael withheld from me made it hard to trust him.

“You look tired,” I stated the obvious.

“I can’t sleep without you.”

His admission caused butterflies to flutter in my stomach. I couldn’t sleep without him either. Yes, the nightmares kept me awake but so did an empty bed. I needed his heat, his scent, and his deep breaths next to me.

“You broke my trust.” The accusation wasn’t fair because despite it all, he saved me. Both my son and I.

“And for that I am sorry. If I could go back, I would have told you that I went to see your father to blackmail him. To ensure that nobody would ever take you away from me. I knew how the Belles and Mobsters agreement worked. Once settled, there was no going back. He didn’t fulfill his obligation to my father, and it was my way to trump the agreement he made with Santiago.”

“You can’t buy me, Raphael.” We stared at each other in silence. “Was your intention to buy me, Raphael?”

The shock flashed across Raphael’s face, followed by fervent emotion.

“It was never my intention to buy you. Only to love you,” he answered in that low, quiet voice that always warned of impending violence. “I demanded your father fulfill the contract not to buy you. But to protect you. Because I love you.”

The words every woman craved to hear. The words I have dreamt about since I left him. He told me he loved me, again and again, and I had yet to say the words. Not because I didn’t love him, but because I was scared.

“Why would you believe your father?” His jaw ticked in thought, his eyes deep and serious on me.

“When we were back on the island, you said that you’d lie a thousand times more, just to keep me with you.” My voice was hesitant as we stared at each other. “I don’t know what to do with that.”

Trust was a fragile thing. It was so easily broken, yet so hard to build. Anya had never betrayed my trust. I didn’t want to betray hers either, but this secret inside of me was killing me. I needed Raphael to understand why it hurt that he kept me in the dark about his knowledge. Anya and I grew up surrounded by secrets and betrayal. Our own parents were supposed to protect us, yet they were the ones to hurt us. Especially Anya. I needed Raphael to understand that keeping secrets from me felt like a betrayal.

It was my whole reason behind becoming a reporter. To help others. To protect the innocent victims because I wasn’t able to help my own sister.

“Since I can remember, Father and Mother scared me,” I murmured softly. “It was always Anya who protected me. She was everything to me. She fed me. She played with me. She taught me my letters, how to tie my shoes. She protected me. But one thing she couldn’t break was my fear of the dark.” I took a deep breath in and then slowly exhaled. “Father hated that I needed a nightlight even as I started school. I screamed at night, scared, because he’d come in the middle of the night and remove the nightlight that Anya would put in for me. Eventually, I got wise and just padded to Anya’s room and slept with her.”

“When I get my hands on him–” he growled. “On both of your parents.”

If anyone could end them, it’d be Raphael. He thrived in darkness, letting it seep into his soul.

“That wasn’t even the worst part,” I whispered, knowing what was coming and still my heart drummed in rhythm

with the fear that could crush my windpipe and leave me broken. “At night, he’d come to Anya’s room. If he’d find me there, he’d beat her and me for my weakness. But when we’d hear his footsteps down the hollow marble hallways, she’d make me go back to my room. But sometimes we heard it too late so she’d make me hide under her bed.”

Tension rolled through him. He took my hands into his. I hadn’t realized I was twisting my fingers. Our fingers interlocked, his thumb rubbing the skin between my thumb and index finger. The motion was soothing.

“Tell me what he did to you, Reina.” His voice was soft, but underlined with something dark and vehement.

Those haunting memories weren’t as frightening when he was with me.

Taking a deep breath, I reached for the courage deep down that Anya always claimed I had. I had lost it in the last month but I refused to cower.

“Not to me,” I whispered, taking a shuddering breath and trying to keep the tears from running down my cheeks. “To Anya. He’d hurt her, touch her.” I swallowed hard. “I’d bite my hand to keep silent and cry for her because she wouldn’t. And all the while, I stared at his hand curled over the edge of the bed with that damned signet ring with our family crest on it.”

His posture remained still, his thumb still moving in soothing movements, but his gaze darkened.

“Anya always told me to be brave,” I continued. “But she was the brave one. Braver than me. Stronger than me too.”

Raphael pulled me against his chest, then cradled my head to his chest while his other hand soothed me with strokes up and down me back.

“You are brave, mi amor.” The conviction in his voice had me almost believing. “Brave. Beautiful. Kind. Everything. You’re everything to me and Gabriel. We need you.”

“I just need a little more time,” I breathed.

Disappointment flickered in his eyes but he nodded. It was his selflessness that made me fall in love with him. His fierce protectiveness. His kindness. Even his ruthlessness.

“I’ll wait for you,” he vowed. “For as long as you need me to.”

“Will you stay the night, please?”

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Chapter Fifty-Six

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RAPHAEL

When she asked me to stay the night, I had Caine bring Gabriel over.

The three of us had Chinese for dinner, ate some fortune cookies and then watched the Disney movie *Luca* with Bruno curled up on Gabriel's lap. It felt like a normal night. Just us.

Though as time neared to go to bed, I could feel Sailor getting restless. Worried.

After tucking Gabriel in, we both headed for our bedroom and climbed into bed. Then, as if she was pulled by the same need, she scooted closer to me and buried her face into my chest. Her hand wrapped over my torso, her breasts pressing against my chest. God, this was heaven and hell. Having her so close to me. Her scent was all over me.

Every so often a soft whimper would leave her lips. Her breathing labored and my chest squeezed. It was a punch to my gut to see the fear on her face. I pulled her closer to me and whispered promises for our future.

She stilled in my arms, her eyes fluttering open.

"Raphael?"

"I'm here," I murmured in a soothing voice.

"You're not leaving, are you?"

“I’ll stay with you for as long as you want me,” I whispered. The words seemed to soothe her and her body relaxed. I pressed my palm against her cheek and she leaned into it, her eyes fluttering shut.

“Always.”

I woke up to the scent of primrose all around me. My wife’s scent.

Hope for our future grew as I watched her sleep in my arms.

Whatever time she needed, she’d get it. Because we both knew, she’d be mine in the end. All my sins, all my wrongs, they had all led me to her and I’d be damned if I let this chance at our happy ending go.

We both earned it. Okay, I didn’t but she and Gabriel sure as fuck did.

Sailor slept on her side, facing me. The first rays of sunshine reflected against her hair like shimmering white gold. Like a halo on an angel's head and sprawled all over my chest, her warm body pressed against mine.

Taking a silky strand of her hair between my fingers, I relished its softness, then moved it out of her face so I could see her. I couldn’t stop touching her so I laced my fingers through her hair and kept smoothing it.

Peaceful, her brows just slightly furrowed.

After the daily updates I received on her nightly nightmares, it gave me hope that she’d get better soon.

My eyes traveled over my wife. My hand rested on the top of her thigh, her skin cool under mine. Wearing a pair of silk, ivory shorts and a matching top, one smooth thigh hooked over me, she looked like an angel in the devil’s bed. The red satin sheets and red accent in the bedroom. She

hadn’t bothered redecorating anything since she’d been staying here.

My dick was hard but I ignored it. For the first time in almost a month, I had my wife next to me and my heart felt at peace. This was exactly where I was meant to be - with her.

And, for the first time in a month, I woke up rested. At peace. Fuck, maybe even happy, despite the morning wood and the risk of blue balls.

Anything for her, as long as she was with me.

I shifted slowly off the bed, careful not to wake her. She needed the rest. The dark circles under her eyes weren’t as dark this morning as last night, but the many nights of restless sleep left a toll on her.

My phone buzzed and I quickly grabbed it so it wouldn’t wake Sailor.

It was a message from Nico. With an address.

Got you, motherfucker. I’m coming for you.

One plane ride and a helicopter ride later and I was in Mexico.

I stalked the area for the past day, surveilling.

For someone that detested Hispanics, Sailor’s father sure loved to deal with them a lot. And who in their right mind would have ever thought the fucker would seek refuge under the roof of the very man he hired Benito King to eliminate.

Anya’s father.

Karma at its best. Or testament to McHale’s deviousness. The fucker bought the house, no doubt as a middle finger to Anya’s father, the man he had murdered.

I arrived at the little, one level stone home with a stucco and terracotta roof, only a couple of hours outside Mexico

City. In Cuapiaxtla. The landscape was stunning and deadly in its dry beauty. Twenty or so colorful homes in the middle of the desert looked out of place.

According to Nico, the one where Father and Mother of the Year were hiding was the red row home. How fucking appropriate. When I was done with them, it'd be fucking bloody red on the inside too.

"Want me to go inside with you?" Caine offered.

"No, not this time," I gritted, the thirst for their spilled blood slithering through my veins. All I had to do was remember Sailor's beaten body and I was ready for a murder spree.

I strode through the little iron gate and stepped on the front porch. A single silent bullet swung the door wide open. I spotted them right away - the couple, members of one of the most prestigious American families, surrounded by poverty while wearing a Brioni suit and Chanel dress.

"Well, well, what do we have here?" I sneered.

Two sets of wide eyes, full of fear, stared back at me. It was clear they never expected to be found.

"You didn't heed my warning," I drawled. "I told you I'd be back, *pinche cabrón*."

They both shot up, ready to run. I responded on instinct. I grabbed the closest thing to me. A statue of Santa Muerte. The saint of death. How fucking appropriate since I'd be the one delivering theirs.

I threw it across the room and it hit Sailor's father in the back of his head. He stumbled down, his hands waving through the air to hold on to something and his fingers gripped his wife's Chanel, taking her down with her.

"Ahh, two for one," I said coolly. "I love it when I get lucky."

I took three large steps and grabbed the old man's shoulder, then picked him up. With my other hand, I grabbed the woman's hair and then started dragging both of them along.

Whimpers. Pleas. Bribes.

I tuned it all out.

They could offer me the world and it wouldn't fucking matter. The one thing I wanted was Sailor's love, given freely. Nobody could buy that.

"Save your breath," I gritted. "You're going to need it. Right up until I cut your tongue out."

Sailor's mother started screaming at the top of her lungs. There was nobody to save her. Nor him. He grunted, threatened.

I surveyed the house and spotted one room. Looked like a pantry without windows. Perfect.

Shoving them both in, I watched as they fell to their knees and shut the door behind me.

"Now, let's play," I purred. "Shall we?"

I pulled out a rope and pushed them so they kneeled back to back. I hunched down and shoved their wrists behind them, then bound them together. They fought but they were too weak, and I fought the urge to just shoot them.

The desire to make them suffer first was too great. Just the way they made my wife suffer. Just the way they made Anya suffer.

I straightened up to my full height and pulled my Swiss knife out of my pocket. I'd miss my torture tools but this would do. It'd make them suffer longer.

I watched Sailor's father and mother struggling against their restraints to no avail. Nobody to fight their battles for them. Nobody to bribe.

"Please, show us mercy," her mother begged. "Please. Please."

Each time I thought about the pain in my wife's voice, rage flooded through me like poison. My fists tightened, seeing the two despicable human beings whimper and cry, begging for mercy.

“Let me ask you a question,” I started casually, my voice seemingly calm while fury boiled deep inside me. “Tell me a single occasion when you offered mercy to Sailor and her sister.”

Silence followed. Eyes full of terror.

“I-I didn’t know,” she whimpered.

“Didn’t know what?” I gritted. “That your husband was raping your daughter. That your husband sold her. That he had your youngest tortured. That he was abusive. Tell me, Mrs. McHale, what didn’t you know?”

No answer.

I took a step towards my two captives and tsked. “You never showed mercy. To either one of your daughters. Both of you are monsters.”

“I only have one daughter,” her old man sputtered.

My eyes shifted to Sailor’s mother. “Mrs. McHale, do you have anything to say to that?”

I could see the struggle in her eyes. To tell me to fuck off, but she wanted to live. Desperately.

She wouldn’t.

Regularly, I had the patience of a saint and could taunt my enemy nice and slow. Today, I was eager to make these two cry. To make them scream in pain.

“I never hurt them,” she cried. “Every mother punishes her kids once in a while.”

“So, you let your husband terrorize them,” I surmised, inching my blade towards the old man. “To rape them. To sell them.”

In an abrupt change of direction, I brought the knife towards her. She squeezed her eyes shut as if that would save her.

The blade pointed at her eyeball, barely an inch from it. She wouldn’t know though because she kept her eyes shut, whimpering like the bitch she was.

And her husband certainly wasn’t attempting to save her.

Fucking pathetic. Both of them.

“If I stab you in your eye,” I pondered loudly, taunting them, “this will be over too soon. So we’ll start with ears. Since you refused to hear your daughters’ pleas.”

In one efficient move, I sliced her right ear. Her piercing scream almost deafened me. Fucking bitch. So because she pissed me off, I sliced his ear off too. Left ear, since he faced in the opposite direction.

“Appropriate, huh?” I barked, their blood already splattering onto my suit. “We’ll take out your ears, then your tongue and finish with your eyes.” Then I got into his face, and gritted through my teeth, “For failing Sailor and Anya.”

They both sobbed like the fucking cowards they were. Gurgling noises filled the air and it fucking annoyed the shit out of me.

I didn’t let it deter me as I followed through. They bawled and screamed like babies, their noses bleeding and snot hanging off their faces. Fucking disgusting.

“You’re not worth it,” I spat out. “Neither one of you.”

In one swift move, I plunged my knife into his pupil and watched him die, as Sailor’s mother pissed herself. Then I pulled my knife out and shifted to her. She shook like a goddamn leaf.

“You had two beautiful, kind daughters,” I snapped at her. “And you used them as sacrificial lambs.”

“You’re crazy,” she screamed. “A fucking devil.”

I swung my arm and plunged the blood soaked knife into her pupil. “Correction: *the* fucking devil. See you in fucking hell, bitch.”

I watched as life vanished from her other eye, both of their bodies slumped and blood covered, dripping down their torsos and their bound arms. It was a fucking mess.

It was then I noticed the ring with the McHale family crest on her father’s finger.

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Chapter Fifty-Seven

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SAILOR

My phone rang.

Caller ID - My diablo.

Surprise washed over me. Raphael was gone before I woke up and I hadn't seen him or heard from him since. That was two days ago.

On one hand I was grateful he offered space. On the other hand, I was disappointed. I really had to get my shit together.

"Hello, Raphael," I answered.

"Reina." His deep voice vibrated through the line and straight to my core. Was that even normal? That his voice could affect me even over the phone.

"Where are you?" I winced at the hint of accusation in my tone. "Gabriel said he hasn't seen you," I clarified.

When I learned Raphael hadn't come home, I'd insisted Gabriel spend the next night with me. But jealousy ate at me. Maybe I was stupid to keep him at bay. The night he spent over was the first time since the kidnapping that I got some sleep. And it was thanks to him. He kept my nightmares at bay.

"I had to take care of some business. But I'm back now."

I waited. For what, I didn't know. Or maybe I did. I wanted him to ask me to come back, which was dumb since

it was me that asked for time. Ugh.

After he spent the night, I realized nightmares with him were better than nightmares alone. Yes, my parents were still alive but from what Aurora told me, they both were hiding. She overheard Alexei talking to Nico Morrelli and my husband. They were hunting them down.

“Oh, okay.” I swallowed nervously. “I’m sorry I missed you the other morning,” I said quietly.

“You were tired,” he said. “I didn’t want to wake you.”

I wished he was here. So I could see him. Inhale his scent into my lungs. Talk to him some more.

I shook my head. Lovely, my devil became my therapy.

“Your parents are dead.”

My heart stilled and a deep relief washed over me. “They are?” I rasped, my voice hoarse.

“Yes.”

“Are you certain?”

“Yes. Caine is bringing you a package,” he declared softly. “It will bring you peace.”

A deep sigh slipped through my lips. My parents. Dead.

I had never felt a stronger relief. For my son. For myself. And justice for Anya.

“Thank you, Raphael.” The words didn’t convey enough. There was so much I wanted to say to him.

That I loved him. That I missed him. And most importantly, that I needed him.

“I’ll be waiting for you, Reina,” he vowed.

Diablo waited for me.

Just as he promised he would.

I loved his darkness, his sins, his possessiveness. Every. Single. Thing.

He and Gabriel had become my whole life. And with my parents permanently gone, I found myself breathing lighter. Like the pressure on my chest has been lifted and it was time to move on.

It had been twenty-four hours since Caine delivered the evidence of my parents' death. A shriveled finger with a ring - the McHale family crest. It should have made me sick but all I felt was relief. Then I burned the last piece of my father to ashes.

May his soul never find peace.

Caine picked me up and brought me to the island. I've asked him to keep it from Raphael. I left my husband and it was fitting that I should be the one coming back. It was almost quarter past nine at night and as I passed Gabriel's room, I found him sound asleep.

Entering his room quietly, I pressed a kiss to his forehead. His mouth slightly open, his one foot dangling off the bed, he looked at peace and I whispered a silent prayer. For such a strong son. For amazing friends. And for the devil of a husband who turned out to be exactly what I needed.

Pressing another kiss, I let my son sleep as I went in search of my husband. I found him in our bedroom.

I stood at the slightly ajar door, watching him, and as if he sensed me, he looked up.

A dangerous haze filled the air, his gaze filled with a possessiveness that bordered on obsession. I didn't understand it, but I wanted to. Because I craved him. Quite possibly, I obsessed over him too.

A silver moon filtered through the open window, illuminating his body. The room smelled like him, the air I breathed consuming me.

My diablo. My savior. My everything.

He killed my parents. For me. For Anya. For Gabriel.

I took steps towards him, closing the gap between us. Truth was that I needed him. He was my life - breathing his

air and his scent so effortlessly consumed me that I never saw him coming nor felt him inch his way into my heart.

With my heartbeat in my throat and a shiver rolling down my spine, my hand reached for him. He didn't move, watching me with that flame in his blue gaze. Hesitation stopped my fingers before tangling in that coal dark hair. I had never wanted someone so much that just the thought of losing him had me bleeding on the inside.

I loved my sister. I loved my son. But Raphael - everything about him - tugged at my heart and my very soul. Every inch of my body burned for him. I didn't want to spend any more time apart.

I was his. For better or for worse.

My breaths came out short as I forced my leg between his slightly parted ones. He watched me like a hungry wolf but still refused to move.

He wanted me to be certain that this was it. He was giving me a final choice to choose him. I'd always choose him.

Him. Our son. Our children.

"I want to come back," I murmured. "If you still want me."

My breaths and the drumming of my heart fluttered in the air before silence liquefied them.

It might have been the most vulnerable I had ever felt. Showing him that I want him and risked rejection. But living with regret was a worse alternative.

"Why?"

"Because I love you," I murmured, closing the distance between us and brushing my hand across his neck and into the thick hair at his nape. "Because life without you is empty. Because you and Gabriel are my family. My everything."

He parted his legs, I kicked off my pink flats and I stepped between them. His eyes met mine, the blaze inside them consuming me.

My fingers laced through the soft strands, gripping a handful. A heady warmth poured off him and absorbed it into my bloodstream. My nails scraped over his scalp and he let out a soft rumble.

His gaze met mine. Deep and consuming. “Finally, Reina,” he rasped, his gaze filling with something dark and sinful. “I missed you so fucking much.”

“Ditto.”

I felt the intensity of his relief in his soft, feather-like touch as his hands skimmed up my thighs. My pulse jump started like a battery on an old car. He made me feel alive. My breasts were sensitive and bare beneath my shirt, heavy and tight, and so close to his face that my skin tightened needing his mouth on them. Only he could relieve this pressure inside me.

His fingers grew firmer on my thighs, gripping the flesh, caressing it. His touch felt so good, his palms heating my skin. His heat burned through my skin, my pussy throbbing with the need for more of his touch. His every squeeze sent a thrum between my legs, settling into an empty ache and I swallowed the moan bubbling in my throat.

“I missed you so much, my diablo,” I whispered softly. He stilled, my admission dancing in the air. “I dreamt of you every night.” My breaths came out ragged and shallow while he remained silent. “Thank you for waiting for me.”

His grip on my skin tightened. “No more leaving me,” he said in a hoarse voice.

“Never,” I murmured. “I’m yours forever. And you’re mine.”

“I’ve been yours from the moment we danced,” he rasped.

The haze in the air began to thicken with every inhale and each brush of my body against his. His hands inched beneath my shorts, gripping the handful of my ass and his palms squeezing it firmly.

“Raphael,” I moaned with a throaty sigh as he kneaded the flesh. His rough touch was the only one that could ever do this to me. His rough palms felt right against my soft skin. Wetness, hot and slick, pooled between my legs and my fingers curled in his hair as my body leaned into him, like his was my only thread to life.

“Are you sure, Reina?” I knew what he meant. “We can wait.”

He was being careful with me, but I was done with being careful. I needed him to know how much I wanted him.

“Yes,” I said with a vehemence that surprised both of us. “I know you got me.“

He hooked his fingers in my panties and pulled them downwards. My body hummed with need, his palms rough all the way down to my ankles. I raised one leg, then the other while his face was so close to my hot center that I could feel his hot breath against it.

“You have no idea how long I’ve waited to hear those words,” he grunted against my core.

I curved my back, the throbbing ache unbearable. I needed his mouth on my pussy.

He discarded my panties and his mouth brushed against the sensitive skin, inches from my clit.

“Please,” I breathed, rubbing against him. He brushed his tongue against my clit and a sizzling sensation shot up my spine that stole my breath. “Ohhh.”

“Is this what you want?” he growled, the sound low deep in his chest.

I watched him through my heavy eye-lids, our gazes connecting.

“You,” I murmured. “I want you,” I admitted softly, letting him see my vulnerability. I wanted him to see that I trusted him with everything - my body, my heart and my soul.

His fingers came back up my legs and slipped back to my ass, brushing against my back entrance before pausing.

I was so hot I found myself rolling my hips for friction. A groan poured out of me when his hand slid further downward and one finger pushed inside of me without warning.

“Ahhh.” My head fell backwards, my insides on fire. My palms came down to his neck, my nails running the length of it.

“Fuck,” he groaned and the roughness of his voice ran down my spine. “You’re so fucking wet.”

“For you,” I breathed. “Only for you.”

A loud smack on my ass sent a rattle through me and my pussy pulsed, clenching with need.

“Raphael,” I yelped softly. “What’s that for?”

“For being without me for a whole month,” he grumbled, then smacked me again. “For leaving me.”

If he meant it as a punishment, he failed because it sent a toe-curling sensation through me.

“I’ll never leave again,” I vowed and a shudder rolled down my back.

“You taste so fucking good,” he groaned. pulling me closer to him with his free hand.

Our lips were inches apart and I leaned closer pressing my mouth on his. I’d do anything for this man, I realized. Anything! Because I couldn’t imagine a day without him, never mind the rest of my life. His hot tongue slid between my lips, stealing my breath away and swallowing my moan. Heat and satisfaction rolled off his body.

I needed him. More than my standards. More than revenge. More than anything else.

I grabbed the hem of my hot pink dress with both hands and pulled it off in one swoop. His mouth latched onto my breast, dragging his teeth across the nipple and a loud moan escaped me.

He groaned, and before I could even lower my arms, his mouth latched onto my breast, giving it one slow suck while dragging his teeth across the nipple. White heat shot like

lightning between my thighs before pulsing in an empty ache. I swayed into him, running one hand around his neck and into his hair. His hand cupped me with a roughness that brought me to my toes. His entire palm rubbed back and forth, a firm pressure against my clit. My head fell back with a moan.

“So fucking wet,” he growled.

He sucked a nipple into his mouth and then slid two fingers deep inside me. Hot, sweet pressure filled me, threatening to overfill as he fingered me. Fast and then lazy. Over and over.

The fire burned into my lower stomach, creating a blaze that needed to be fed. And if not, I would go up in smoke.

“Oh, God . . .” I moaned, digging my nails into his shoulders. I was so close, so damn close. “Raphael, please.”

He trailed over every inch of my breasts, kissing them like he would my mouth: with lips and tongue and teeth. His fingers slipped out of me, pulling wetness to my clit, and when he pushed them back in, pressure burst into tingles and flame.

Intense pleasure created lights dancing behind my eyes; my blood burned. A shudder fluttered through my body as though three shots of liquor poured straight into my bloodstream, before a languid heat spread. My legs had given out and I sat on his thigh. His eyes were heavy-lidded, the blue flames intoxicating.

His thumb grazed my lips, smearing my wetness across my bottom lip. I drew my tongue across it and licked it off.

His gaze flashed, burning like blue sapphires.

“Get on the bed.” It was a demand. His voice was hoarse. “I’m going to fuck your tight pussy. So you remember who you belong to.”

My heart thumped against my ribcage and I shifted off him and crawled onto his bed, then settled on my back. The sheets scented of him, intoxicating and addictive - a warm

licorice scent and man. Danger and ruthlessness. All of him.

“I belong to you. Always you,” I breathed, our eyes locked. A flame pulsed between my legs and warmth curled low in my stomach.

Holding my stare, he slipped his boxers off and my eyes roamed every single inch of him. He was beautiful, a god with tanned skin and tattoos. His erection strained and I reached out to wrap my fingers over his smooth, hard length. Anticipation thrummed back to life between my legs. The way he watched me had my pulse throbbing and my body ready to feel him inside me. Goose bumps spread across my skin despite the hot, humid air. He grabbed my ankle and jerked me to the side of the bed and a soft squeal escaped me.

“I’m going to fuck you until the entire island hears your screams,” he rasped roughly.

“Yes,” I breathed, needy and eager.

He grasped my thighs, parted them, and let out a low curse. “So fucking drenched.”

His arm wrapped around my waist and he pushed me back onto the pillows. He crawled onto the bed and kneeled between my legs.

“I love you, Reina,” he rasped, the emotions thick in his voice and his eyes. “So damn much that each second away from you tore at my fucking insides.”

My body responded immediately and my eyes misted. Jesus Christ, I had become a cry baby.

I pressed my palm against his cheek. “How many women have you told you loved before?” I asked hesitantly.

“Do I strike you as a man that says I love you to just anyone?” he drawled, the beautiful smile on his lips making me warm everywhere. “I’ve never said it before, except to my mother. So Sailor Brooke McHale Santos, listen carefully. I love you. Only you. I love you so damn much that not even beating some *pinche cabrón* ass gives me

satisfaction.” He ran his calloused palms down my thighs, spreading them wider. “I love you. Your heart. Your brain. Your body. Your pussy.” A sigh left me as his fingers brushed against my wet folds. “I just love the whole you. It’s a package deal. I want to grow old with you. Have babies with you. See every inch of the world with you. Fuck it, I’ll even save the world with you.”

I blinked and watched as his eyes grew so dark, they reminded me of stormy oceans.

“That’s the most romantic thing I have ever heard,” I whispered, emotions thick in my voice.

His kiss was bruising, possessive. Obsessive. Just the way I loved it.

Then his grin turned slightly wicked and he trailed his mouth lower and lower down my body. I leaned on my hands watching him, and as he pressed his face between my thighs and inhaled, my head fell back.

When Raphael set his mind to something, he was all in. And God, was he ever.

His arms wrapped around my thighs, lifting them slightly, and then he licked me all the way from ass to clit. Steam crawled through my blood, lighting me on fire. I gasped, my fingers fisting the sheets. It was so dirty, so wrong, so inappropriate, but God, maybe that’s why it felt so good.

“Do that again,” I breathed. A deep sound of satisfaction came from his throat.

And he did it again. Again and again. The hot sweep of his tongue sent a violent shiver through me. A mindless haze brushed my thoughts away, leaving lust and insanity behind. I was so hot, burning up like a comet falling from space. My hips rolled beneath his mouth as he licked me everywhere he could reach. Each fiery wave coalesced into an empty ache between my thighs, until I could only feel my ache for him.

His arms tightened around my thighs and his mouth pressed harder on my pussy. My eyes rolled back into my head. I yanked his hair as hard as I could, and he finally raised his head. The blue in his eyes burned like flames.

“I want you inside me,” I begged.

He crawled over me, licking and nipping my stomach and breasts as he did. His body covered mine. He was so heavy. A warm, blissful heavy that made my skin sing with satisfaction. He kissed my neck, while bracing his hands on either side of my head. I realized he’d licked every part of my body and I’d barely touched him. I *needed* to touch him, like my life depended on it. Tension rolled through him as my hands slid down his back, his sides, and when they settled on his abs, he closed his eyes, his jaw tightening.

“Lower,” he gritted. “My hand has been a poor substitute for my wife.”

My heartbeat fluttered and I slid my hand down until I cupped his erection. His forehead fell to rest on mine and a rumble escaped his chest. He pressed himself further into my palm. He felt hot, thick, hard and utterly masculine. A rush of longing clawed at my insides and I wrapped my hand around his length.

“Ah, fuck,” he groaned. So hot and smooth. My lower stomach filled with warmth. A pulse bloomed between my legs. I ran my hand down to the base and then all the way back up.

His hand cupped the side of my face. “I missed you so goddamn much,” he rasped, nipping my jaw.

“I missed you too.” I gave his hard cock a slow, gentle tug, and whispered in his ear, “I’ll make it up to you.”

Releasing his length, I straddled his hips. Resting my hands on either side of him, I leaned forward and kissed his throat. Then licked his skin because I loved the taste of him

“Fuck.” His hand cupped the back of my head, his fingers lacing through the strands. I couldn’t get enough of him. I ran my hands over his biceps, pecs, then back into

his hair. And all the while, I kissed his throat and sucked on it, then nipped at his earlobe.

He fisted the hair at my nape to make me pull away slightly and I watched him with half-lidded eyes. My breasts brushed his chest, sending sizzles of pleasure lower and making me ache for friction. I ground down on his erection. It spread a fire through me that made me drop my head and dig my fingers into the sheets.

I rolled my hips against him, using his chest for leverage and rubbing my wetness up and down his length. Just as his cock brushed against my wetness and the head of his erection slid inside me, he groaned so deeply I could feel it vibrate through his chest. He was so big and a tremble rolled through me, my exhales heavy and uneven. My fingers curled on his abs as I sank onto him another inch. A delicious fullness felt like heaven and a throaty sigh escaped me.

His body was pulled taut beneath my hands and my whimper filled the space between us as he slid further down, then in one harsh thrust, his length disappeared inside me.

We both watched him as he sank inside me, both of us breathing erratically. Raphael stared where we were joined, his gaze possessive and dark.

“Mine,” he growled, then flipped us over, so I was on my back. He started moving, thrusting all the way inside me, hard and fast.

My back arched off the bed. I felt so full, his weight a welcomed reprieve after weeks without him. His body was so heavy as he lay on top of me, one hand braced on the bed and the other cradling my head. His chest brushed against mine, his ragged breaths fanning my neck with each hard thrust.

His lips pressed against my ear.

“I’ll never let you go again.” I shivered at the deep voice, full of dark possession. He nuzzled my neck. His voice was

warm and smooth, but his teeth were clenched. “You’ll be mine forever and I’ll be yours.”

He held me by a fistful of hair at my nape and then he fucked me. Skin against skin. A scrape of teeth. The heavy weight of him. Unrelenting. It was so intense I fought to find air to breathe, to find anything that wasn’t harsh and him. Soon, the intensity softened, my body warming and molding to his. Every thrust began to kindle a spark inside of me that only the next thrust could sate. My nails dug into his biceps, and a small shudder rolled under his skin. He talked while he screwed, right against my ear in a deep rasp, and it made me crazy.

“Your pussy is my heaven and my hell, Reina,” he praised.

The words sank into my skin and filled every space in my body with warm satisfaction. Every time his pelvis ground against mine, molten heat spread from my clit outward. A throaty moan escaped my lips with every thrust, as though he pushed each one out of me. I was nothing but heat and flame and pleasure.

“Raphael,” I moaned, my body on the verge of orgasm. He covered my mouth with his palm, while the other hand remained fisted in my hair. It was rough and restrictive and so addictive. I needed this - his restraint, his domination, to feel him everywhere.

From the moment my eyes connected with Raphael, I’d known my body would be lost to him. But this… this was even better than I ever envisioned. Better than I have ever hoped for.

The orgasm shot through me, violent and powerful, sending a shudder through me that chattered my teeth.

Heat pulsed in my lower stomach before branching out in tingles and dazzles of the best feeling ever. When I came down, it was to him motionless inside of me, watching me with a dark blue gaze.

He pulled his hand from my mouth, and by the teeth marks I realized I'd bitten down on it when I came.

"Who fucks you?" he growled.

I shivered. "You. And only you," I breathed. "Always you."

A rumble of satisfaction came from his chest, and he rested his forehead against mine.

"I'm going to fuck you for the next month. Get you pregnant. See your belly swell with my babies."

Why did that make me so hot?

"No more birth control," I murmured.

"Fuck," he groaned, his eyes shining like blue stars. Our lips hovered inches apart. "Best fucking day ever."

His lips took mine in a hard kiss, licking and biting. Our kiss was wet, messy and rough. Because that's how Raphael kissed.

He thrust inside of me, deep and slow, and the intimacy I felt had me feeling raw and exposed.

And I knew Raphael had me. He'd always have me because he loved me.

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EPILOGUE

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Sailor -One Year Later

The devil had found me but contrary to everyone's belief, he didn't steal my soul. I'd given it freely, right along with my heart and my body.

Unlike the day we buried my sister, today rays of sunshine filled my soul and the mountain around us. The scent of pine trees traveled through the cool breeze, the first signs of fall weather on its way.

The valley and mountain stretched all around us. The view was peaceful and breathtaking. Everything Anya deserved in life, but could only get in death. The ghosts still came to visit, but I had a devil on my side who always chased them away.

I returned my gaze to the grave. The Ashfords brothers always ensured Anya's grave had flowers on it. Primroses.

Anya always said those were her favorite flowers. For her they symbolized protection, love, and safety. Something our family had finally gotten. Thanks to the devil I danced with. She would have loved Raphael; I knew it without a doubt. He saved us, even her ghosts and righted all the wrongs that our parents had done.

My eyes roamed the scripture of the simple tombstone.

A simple statement. For a person that meant the world to me.

Forever My Sister. Forever My Everything.

That still hadn’t changed. Except, now we had more people in our circle. Gabriel. My husband. My hand rubbed over my large belly. Another month and we’d welcome a new family member.

Anya Esmeralda Santos.

Raphael’s arm came around me, offering comfort and keeping me warm, while Gabriel held my hand, his eyes glued to the tombstone.

Tears pricked at my eyes. It was a side-effect of pregnancy. Way too many emotions.

“She’s looking over us, Reina.” My husband pressed a kiss on my forehead. “She’s always with us.”

I looked at my son. Her son. Our son. The older Gabriel got, the more of Anya I saw in him. The protective streak. Bravery. And the incredible strength.

“She is,” I murmured, pulling Gabriel into a tight hug while Raphael wrapped us both into his arms.

The devil kept us all together.

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PREVIEW OF BELLES & MOBSTERS: SASHA

"Are you out of your goddamn mind?"

He slammed the door to his office. To say my brother Vasili was pissed off was the understatement of the century. The fucking glass of the building rattled from the slamming door or quite possibly from the force of his voice.

No matter. What's done is done; it was time to move on.

"Do you realize the whole goddamn world watched you kidnap that woman?" he bellowed. "It was fucking televised."

"Hmm, was it?" I snickered. "I would have never guessed from all the news vans out front."

"What in the fucking hell were you thinking, Sasha?" he roared. "Do you know how many fucking assholes I'll have to bribe for this shit?"

I shrugged my shoulders. He didn't have to bribe anyone. I was capable of settling my own scores.

Sitting behind the desk of Vasili's office, I leaned back into the chair and propped up my legs on the table. I picked up the *People* magazine Vasili had on his desk. My fucking brother always had that fucking magazine on his desk, but I had yet to see him read it. He probably got it for my benefit.

"Put the fucking magazine down," he said through gritted teeth.

“Relax, Brother,” I told him. “The bride in distress is safe and sound.”

For the most part, I added silently, snickering to myself.

I left her tied to my bed - gloriously naked and sexually frustrated.

Unfortunately, my plan backfired a bit because I’d been going around with a hard dick that refused to get the message that we weren’t fucking anyone today.

“For fuck’s sake, Sasha,” Vasili hissed, barely keeping a rein on his temper. I could see it in the vein throbbing in his neck. The one that his wife couldn’t seem to get enough of because I caught her licking it on more than one occasion. Fucking horny rabbits. Only Isabella found my brother attractive. “Are you trying to start a war? First the whole goddamn thing with Wynter and keeping her away from Liam Brennan. Now this fucking shit!”

And there it was. I was waiting for the moment when he’d bring that up. He and everyone else could go fuck themselves. Wynter, the ice skating princess, needed me, and I would never leave her hanging.

I opened the drawer of Vasili’s desk that I’d taken over and found a piece of bubblegum. The crinkle of the wrapper filled the space, probably grating Vasili’s nerves, egging him on.

“You said you wanted to see me married,” I drawled lazily, ignoring his jab about Wynter. “So I had to find a bride.”

“I said find a bride, not kidnap one,” he roared.

“Semantics.”

I swore Vasili’s blond hair, so much like mine, almost turned red with rage. And I fucking relished in it.

I threw the gum into my mouth and started chewing. I popped the gum, watching with delight as Vasili’s jaw ticked. He was fucking pissed. No surprise there. I didn’t particularly care for chewing gum, but it was such a

goddamn thrill to see the pissed off expressions on people's faces when I popped it.

So just for good measure, I blew a bubble, waited for it to get a decent size, and popped it again.

Our eyes locked in a battle of wills. The freaky blue eyes we shared stared back at me, probably contemplating my murder. I bet my brother fought the urge to reach across his desk and choke the life out of me. He wanted to so fucking badly, but he'd never hear the end of it from his wife.

It was good to have friends in high places.

The door to his office opened and my sister, Tatiana, strode in wearing a black dress. It had been a year and she still insisted on mourning.

"So I hear you're starting a war," she announced. "Can I join in?"

Our family was definitely a different shade of crazy.

TO BE CONTINUED

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to thank my friends and family for their continued support.

To my alpha and beta readers - you are all amazing. You put up with my crazy deadlines and even crazier organization.

Thank you to **Susan C.H.** and **Beth H.** who always have my back. I don't know how I'd get through some of these without you! And a big thank you Susan for giving it several reads.

To **Christine S., Denise R. and Jill H.** - you ladies rock! And to a countless number of others - THANK YOU!

My books wouldn't be what they are without each one of you.

To my editor, Rachel at **MW Editing**.

To my amazeballs cover designer **Eve Graphics Designs, LLC**.

To the bloggers and reviewers who helped spread the word about this book. I appreciate you so much and hearing you love my work, makes it that much more enjoyable!

And last but not least, **to all my readers**! This wouldn't be possible without you. Thank you for believing in me. Thank you for your amazing and supportive messages. Simply, THANK YOU.

I get to do this because all of you.

XOXO

Eva Winners

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